Populist Online Communication

Interactions among Politicians, Journalists, and Citizens

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ABSTRACT

Populism continues to play a central role in the politics of Western democracies. The recent rise of populist politicians is often associated with their allegedly successful use of digital media. However, although research on populist actors' use of social media has increased in recent years, there is still scarce research on what constitutes the supposed affinity between populism and digital media. Furthermore, the role of online news media has been neglected, despite the continuing central role of the mass media for the visibility of populist actors and ideas. Finally, it is still unclear how populist online communication affects citizens' manifest behavior. To answer these substantial research gaps, this thesis pursues two major research aims: First, it investigates drivers of populist communication in politicians' online self-presentation and online news media representation. Second, this thesis examines the effects of populist online communication on citizens' behavior in the form of user reactions to politicians' social media posts and reader comments on online news articles. By analyzing the interactions of three key actor groups—politicians, journalists, and citizens—and by following a multimethod approach combining content analysis, digital trace data, and an experimental survey, this dissertation connects research on both the supply and demand sides of populism. Based on five internationally comparative studies and the overarching synopsis, this thesis demonstrates that populist online communication is driven by the reciprocal interactions among politicians, journalists, and citizens and is influenced by various factors on the macro, meso, and micro levels. Furthermore, this dissertation shows that populist online communication resonates with citizens and is multiplied by them—specifically by citizens with prior strong populist attitudes. Thus, the recent rise of populism can be associated with a transformation of the relationship among politicians, journalists, and citizens that is accelerated by new communication technologies.

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Sina Blassnig

In Loving Memory of my Grandmother,

Ida «Mägy» Blassnig

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1 INTRODUCTION

"The others have newspapers, radio, television, banks, and corporate money—we have you, we have the network,"[1] Matteo Salvini told his followers in a video posted on Facebook in February 2018, promoting a contest on the social network. That was one month before the Italian elections and before the leader of the populist right-wing party Lega Nord became Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister of Italy. Salvini's message is reminiscent of a statement by Donald Trump, who had told *Financial Times* journalists in the Oval Office on April 2, 2017, "Without the tweets, I wouldn't be here. I have over 100m [followers]. I don't have to go to the fake media."[2] Similar sentiments were heard from the left wing. Jeremy Corbyn, for example, speaking at the 2018 Labour Party Conference, called on Labour activists to "challenge [the British press'] propaganda of privilege by using the mass media of the 21st century: social media."[3] In recent years, the open disdain that mostly right-wing—as well as some left-wing—politicians have shown for the established mainstream news media has been a recurrent theme in political campaigns in Western democracies. Relatedly, the attempts of these politicians to bypass the mainstream news media through social media are frequently discussed. In particular, the rise of populist politicians and parties is often associated with their allegedly successful use of social networking sites—and often seen as signs of a "populist Zeitgeist" that Mudde (2004) had predicted more than a decade earlier.

At the end of the last century, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, pp. 219–220) argued that the expansion of media outlets and the associated new opportunities for the public to become politically active would increase populist tendencies and anti-elitist popularization. Around the same time, Bimber (1998) claimed that the Internet might promote an "unmediated" communication between citizens and the government. According to this "populist claim", the Internet would increase citizen influence on politics at the expense of elites and political intermediaries, such as traditional political parties, labor unions, and the mainstream press (Bimber, 1998, pp. 137–138). Today, the assumption that politicians use the Internet to bypass traditional mass media and communicate directly with their followers is

[1] You can find the original post under the following link:
https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10155517355258155&id=252306033154 (08.10.2019)

[2] *Financial Times* (April 2, 2017). Donald Trump: Without Twitter, I would not be here. https://www.ft.com/content/943e322a-178a-11e7-9c35-0dd2cb31823a (08.10.2019)

[3] You can find the script of Jeremy Corbyn's speech under the following link: https://labour.org.uk/press/jeremy-corbyn-speaking-labour-party-conference-today/ (08.10.2019)

mostly applied to their self-presentation on social media (e.g., Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). As the quotes above show, populists often make this claim themselves. At the same time, populist actors regularly succeed in attracting the attention of the mass media with their provocative statements that cater to media logic and news values (Mazzoleni, 2008). The quoted politicians, Trump, Salvini, and Corbyn, are all consistently featured in the media—and not uncommonly with statements they first made on social media. Thus, in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), populist actors may also use social media to gain attention in the mass media. The digitization of traditional news media leads to an increased commercialization and audience orientation that could make news media even more susceptible to populist statements (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017). Furthermore, online media provide citizens with more possibilities for direct feedback and interaction, for example via likes, shares, or comments. Surprisingly, however, for a long time, there was hardly any scientific knowledge about the occurrence and effects of populist *online* communication. Are populist actors more successful in garnering support on social media than politicians who do not represent populist views or communicate in a populist way? How do online news media report on populist statements by politicians, and do journalists voice populist ideas themselves? Moreover, what reactions does populist online communication elicit in citizens? This dissertation addresses these substantial research gaps.

From a societal perspective, these questions are highly relevant against the background of the increasing prevalence of populism and the changing political communication environment. Although populist actors challenge constitutional democracy from *within* the democratic system (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 410), populism presents a serious challenge to liberal democracy because it puts the will of the people above the rule of law (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004). However, as Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) discusses, "populism can also be conceived of as a kind of democratic corrective since it gives voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites, and forces them to react and change the political agenda." Regardless of whether populism is considered a threat, corrective, or an inherent feature of a democratic system (Canovan, 1999, 2002), it is often associated with a political transformation that is accelerated by new communication technologies. To assess the dangers—and possibilities— of populism in liberal democracies, it is necessary to understand what makes populist ideas so widespread in the political and social discourse and so seemingly popular in online media. From a communication science perspective, questions arise as to what constitutes populist online communication, how politicians use populist messages in their self-representation, how populist actors and messages are portrayed in the media, and what effects populist communication has on citizens.

Scholarly awareness of the crucial role of populist communication and empirical research in this area have increased immensely in the last few years. However, despite the early linking of populism and the Internet by Bimber (1998), for a long time no research has specifically analyzed populist *online* communication. In fact, at the beginning of this dissertation project, there were only a handful of empirical studies that investigated the use of social media by predefined populist actors, mostly as case studies or in single countries (J. Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2015; Groshek & Engelbert, 2012; van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). More recently, scholars have discussed the theoretical relation and affinity between populism and the Internet (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017; Krämer, 2017) and specifically social media (Gerbaudo, 2018; Postill, 2018). Scholars have also started to investigate the use of populist communication in politicians' social media presence more systematically. However, most studies have focused on the social media use of predefined populist actors (Jacobs & Spierings, 2018; Waisbord & Amado, 2017) or single countries (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Stier, Posch, Bleier, & Strohmaier, 2017). Few studies have investigated the use of populist communication on social media by political actors across the political spectrum and across countries (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Zulianello, Albertini, & Ceccobelli, 2018) or focused on who follows and supports populist actors on social media (Heiss & Matthes, 2017). The complex relationship between populism and the media has been discussed theoretically (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2003, 2008, 2014) and analyzed empirically in the traditional press (T. Akkerman, 2011; Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2010; Rooduijn, 2014a; Wettstein, Esser, Büchel et al., 2018; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018). However, to my knowledge, no studies so far have investigated populism in *online* news media. Moreover, although it is by now an established hypothesis that populism in the media affects media users (for an overview, see, e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018), there is hardly any research on the role of citizens and the effects that populist online communication has on their behavior. Most previous research has focused on how populist communication affects people's attitudes (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2011, 2013; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a, 2018b; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017). Fewer studies have investigated the effects of populist communication on people's behavior with regard to voting (e.g., Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2016) or political engagement (Hameleers et al., 2018). Most studies have relied on experimental settings, with only a few exceptions that analyze the effects of populist communication under real-life conditions (Bos et al., 2013; Müller et al., 2017; Wirz et al., 2018).

Thus, many questions remain unanswered. First, there is still scarce research on what constitutes the supposed affinity between digital media and populism, to what extent actors use populist communication online, and what contextual factors or opportunity structures promote the use of populist online communication. Second, whereas research on populism and social media has increased, these platforms are still often looked at in isolation and rarely compared to other digital or traditional communication channels as part of a larger information system (de Vreese et al, 2018) (for recent exceptions see Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019; Ernst, Esser, Blassnig, & Engesser, 2019). Specifically, the role of online news media has been neglected, despite the fact that the mass media continue to play a central role in the rise of recent populist actors (e.g., Esser et al., 2017). Third, although vast literature argues that citizens have come to play a more active part in political online communication, their role in populist communication remains underresearched. Very few studies investigate the effects of populist communication on citizens' behavior or specifically in an online context. Moreover, there are only very few field studies that examine the effects of populist communication outside of an experimental context. Online media, on the one hand, enable citizens to directly react to politicians' tweets or Facebook posts, as well as news articles, and to voice their own opinions in reader comments. On the other hand, this behavior is directly observable, as it manifests in digital trace data such as likes, shares, or comments. Finally, the supply side and the demand side of populism are still mostly looked at separately.

To address these substantial research gaps, I have formulated two overarching questions that build the foundation of this cumulative dissertation:

1. What are the *drivers* of populist online communication?
    a. With regard to politicians' online self-presentation
    b. With regard to its representation in the online news media
2. What *effects* does populist online communication have on citizens' reactions?
    a. In response to politicians' self-presentation
    b. In response to its representation in the online news media

Thus, in this dissertation, I extend previous research by looking at populist communication across different online communication platforms and by investigating the interaction of three key actor groups—(1) politicians, (2) journalists, and (3) citizens (see also Aalberg et al., 2017)—that have so far often been investigated separately. I analyze (1) how politicians across the political spectrum use populist communication in their self-presentation, (2) how journalists represent populist ideas in the mass media, and (3) how citizens respond to populist communication

in the form of user reactions to politicians' social media posts and reader comments in response to online news articles. With regard to politicians' self-presentation, I contribute to the literature by examining populism in the communication of a broad range of political actors across the political spectrum and different communication channels. In relation to the role of journalists, as de Vreese et al. (2018, 432) urge, I consider the media both as a *platform* for transmitting populist messages by politicians *through* the media and as possible *originators* of populist messages in the form of populism *by* the media (Esser et al., 2017). With regard to citizens, I explore the role of *populist citizen journalism* (Esser et al., 2017) in the form of populist reader comments as well as the effects of populist online communication on citizens' manifest behavior in the form of popularity cues (Porten-Chée et al., 2018). Finally, by investigating both drivers and effects of populist communication and by combining content analysis, digital trace data, and an experimental survey, I connect research on the supply side and the demand side of populism.

The two overarching questions build the foundation of this dissertation, are empirically assessed in the five related publications and will serve as a guide through this synopsis. This synopsis continues by defining populist ideology and populist communication from an ideational perspective in Chapter 2 and presents the theoretical framework for populist online communication in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the methodological design. Chapter 5 summarizes the five individual publications and their findings. Finally, in Chapter 6, I will discuss the key findings with regard to their theoretical implications, integrate the main conclusions in a heuristic framework, critically review methodological contributions and limitations, provide an outlook for future research, and assess societal implications with regard to populist online communication and democracy.

2 POPULISM: AN IDEATIONAL APPROACH

Populism has been a highly contested concept or, as Canovan (1999, p. 3) described it, a "notoriously vague term." It has been defined as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), a political strategy (Weyland, 2017), a style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016), and a discourse (Laclau, 2005). However, in the last few years, scholars have increasingly started to follow an *ideational approach,* which understands populism as a specific *set of ideas* (Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay, & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Taggart, 2000). This approach shifts the focus from the organizational or policy features of specific populist parties or movements to the underlying populist ideas. These populist ideas result in a common populist discourse and a shared way of seeing the political world (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018, pp. 4–5).

The ideational approach to populism has several advantages over other conceptualizations. First, it allows combining research on the supply and the demand side of populist ideas. Second, it helps to bridge different perspectives in political science and communication science. More specifically, it enables researchers to connect the understanding of populism as a 'thin' ideology and as a discourse. Third, the ideational approach understands populism as a gradual or continuous variable or a matter of degree. This understanding makes it useful to compare the extent of populism in the communication of a wide range of actors and across different communication channels. Fourth, the ideational approach renders populism empirically measurable through different methodological approaches, most commonly through content analysis on the supply side and surveys or experimental research on the demand side (de Vreese et al., 2018; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

Following this ideational approach, I conceive of populism as a 'thin' ideology (Mudde, 2004) that manifests discursively as specific populist key messages in the communication of political actors, media actors, or citizens (de Vreese et al., 2018) and can also be measured as populist attitudes on the individual level (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018).

In the following, I will first elaborate on the definition of populism as a 'thin' ideology and on its core ideas. Second, I will focus on a communication-centered perspective (de Vreese et al., 2018; Stanyer, Salgado, & Strömbäck, 2017) and explain how this populist ideology can be expressed in the form of populist communication on the supply side. Third, I will discuss the appeal of populist ideas to citizens on the demand side.

2.1 Populism as 'Thin' Ideology

In one of the most cited definitions of populism, Mudde (2004, p. 543, emphasis i.O.) describes populism as "*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté générale *(general will) of the people.*" Similarly to Mény and Surel (2002, pp. 11–13), Mudde's (2004) definition emphasizes three core components of populist ideology: the people, the elite, and popular sovereignty.

The first key core concept of populism is the primacy of 'the people.' The people are seen as good, virtuous, and pure (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2017) and are regarded as homogenous or monolithic entity that can have a common will, common interests, and common desires (e.g., Canovan, 2002; Kriesi, 2014). Second, in the populist worldview, the people are opposed by the corrupt, immoral, incompetent elite that has betrayed the people and is out of touch with their needs and interests (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004). Importantly, this fundamental juxtaposition between 'the people' and 'the elite' is normative and moralistic in nature (Mudde, 2017). Populism presents a Manichean worldview in which the people is inherently good and the elite is evil (Hawkins, 2010, p. 33) and "in which there are only friends and foes" (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). Third, populism postulates a struggle over political sovereignty (see also Engesser, Fawzi et al., 2017). According to populist ideology, politics should be a direct expression of the general will of the people (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mudde, 2004, 2017). Thus, the people is regarded as the ultimate sovereign that has currently been deprived of its rights by the elite. Therefore, popular sovereignty must be restored (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 408; Mény & Surel, 2002, p. 13). This view is closely connected to the interpretation of the people as pure and homogenous and the idea of a "common sense" as the logical result of its virtuousness and common will (Mudde, 2017; Taggart, 2000, p. 95). While the elites are portrayed as out of touch with the people, the populists can present themselves as voice of the people or *vox populi* (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 408; Mudde, 2017, p. 33).

The monolithic conception of the people further implies that there are some out-groups that are not considered part of the 'true' people (Mény & Surel, 2002, p. 12). These "dangerous 'others'" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3) do not share the people's virtues and values and are therefore seen as a threat or burden to society and excluded from the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 324). The elite, in contrast, is seen as conspiring with these 'others' against the people (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 5) and as serving the "special interests" of specific

groups instead of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2017, p. 33; Weyland, 1999, p. 382). However, it has been disputed whether the exclusion of specific social groups should be regarded as a core concept of populism.

Following Mudde (2004, p. 544) and Stanley (2008), populism is defined as only a 'thin' or 'thin-centered' ideology according to Freeden (1996). This means that although populism can be regarded as a distinct ideology with specific core concepts, it can be enriched with more substantive, *thicker* ideologies such as nationalism or socialism (Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004). Thus, the proposed definition of populism above is a minimal definition that is inclusive and applicable to different manifestations of populism across the political spectrum from left to right (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). There is debate over where to draw the line between the 'thin' populist ideology and the 'thicker' 'add-on' or 'host' ideologies. This quandary applies particularly to the exclusion of 'others' (Engesser, Fawzi et al., 2017). Some authors see exclusion as an integral element of populist ideology (e.g., Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017b) or argue that the 'others' may even substitute 'the elite' as an out-group in a type of *excluding* populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Other authors consider the exclusion of 'others' to be an additional characteristic that is specific only to right-wing populism (Rooduijn, 2014b; Wirth et al., 2016). Following de Vreese et al. (2018), I assume an intermediate position and argue that the construction and exclusion of specific outgroups is inherent in the populist conception of the people as a homogenous and monolithic in-group. However, the exclusion of a specific social group from the people is not seen as a necessary element of populist ideology, and the exclusion of 'others' may be more or less symbolic or explicit for different types of populism (Mény & Surel, 2002, p. 12).

Depending on accompanying 'host' ideologies, 'the people'—and, as a consequence, also 'the elite' and 'the others'—can assume different meanings. The most common distinction is between the people as sovereign or demos, nation or ethnos, or class (Canovan, 1999; Kriesi, 2014; Mény & Surel, 2000). The concept of 'the people' thereby refers to an "idealized conception of the community" (Taggart, 2004, p. 274) or a *heartland* (Taggart, 2000), which refers to a romanticized version of the past when the world was still in order. How 'the people' is defined also implies who does not belong to this category (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017) and, thus, how 'the elite' and 'the others' are conceptualized. The elite may be not only the political, economic, juridical, media, scientific, or cultural elite but also generally the established structure of power and elite values (Canovan, 1999, p. 3). Similarly, the others may be conceptualized in different ways, for example in political, economic, or cultural terms, and juxtaposed to the people with regard to their needs, origin, ethnicity, citizenship, political rights, etc. (see

also Blassnig et al., 2019). Whereas the elite are the target of a vertical differentiation from the people, the others are subject to a horizontal differentiation or even a "downward-oriented" social comparison (Reinemann et al., 2017, p. 21) because these groups are often considered the "bottom of society" (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 418).

Thus, in this thesis, populism is understood as a 'thin' ideology that describes a Manichean conflict between 'the people' and 'the elite' over sovereignty in society. Furthermore, the homogenous conceptualization of 'the people' as the favored in-group implies that there are specific social groups that are excluded from the people as 'others'. Depending on the parsimony of the conceptualization, populism as a 'thin' ideology therefore consists of three (Mény & Surel, 2002; Wirth et al., 2016) or four (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Blassnig et al., 2019; Engesser, Fawzi et al., 2017) dimensions: *people-centrism, anti-elitism, popular sovereignty,* and *the exclusion of 'others'.*

2.2 Supply Side: Populist Communication

Populist ideology can be regarded as a mental construct or belief system that exists in populists' minds (Kriesi, 2018, p. 13).[4] To express this worldview, mobilize the people, or obtain intended effects on an audience, populist ideas must be communicated discursively (de Vreese et al., 2018, 425; Kriesi, 2018, p. 13). Populist communication can therefore be understood as the discursive manifestation of populist ideology in the communication of any actor, not only political actors but also media actors or citizens (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 425). It is of secondary importance whether the communicators actually believe what they say or whether they are using populist communication strategically—either way, it will be interpreted by the audience as populist (Kriesi, 2018, p. 13). Thus, on the supply side, populist ideology can be empirically identified primarily in political discourse (Kriesi, 2018, p. 13).

Identifying populist ideology in political discourse can also be referred to as a *communication-centered approach* (de Vreese et al., 2018; Sorensen, 2017; Stanyer et al., 2017). This approach starts by identifying key characteristics of populist communication and then analyzes the extent to which different actors use these populist communication elements. Consequentially, actors are not distinguished as either 'populist' or 'not populist.' Instead, the degree to which particular actors are populist is determined as a matter of degree based on whether and to what extent they use specific populist key messages.

[4] See also Chapter 2.3 on populist attitudes.

Building on the definition of populist ideology, populist communication similarly consists of three or four dimensions: *people-centrism, anti-elitism, restoring sovereignty*, and the *exclusion of 'others'*. The populist communicator can communicate these dimensions through populist key messages aimed at three target groups: *the people*, *the elite*, and *the others*. Figure 1 illustrates the different dimensions of populist communication and their relation to the three target groups. Based on previous literature (Bos et al., 2011; Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016), twelve populist key messages can be assigned to these four core dimensions. First, people-centrism includes four key messages that advocate for the people (Wirth et al., 2016): An actor can approach the people, praise the people's virtues, praise the people's achievements, or describe the people as homogenous. Second, anti-elitism combines three key messages that are hostile and conflictive toward the elite (Wirth et al., 2016): An actor may discredit the elite, blame the elite, or detach the elite from the people. Third, restoring sovereignty comprises two key messages (Wirth et al., 2016): An actor may demand the people's sovereignty or deny the sovereignty of the elite. Finally, the exclusion of 'others' contains three key messages that are hostile and conflictive toward specific social out-groups: An actor can discredit 'others', blame 'others', or exclude 'others' from the people (see also Blassnig et al., 2019).

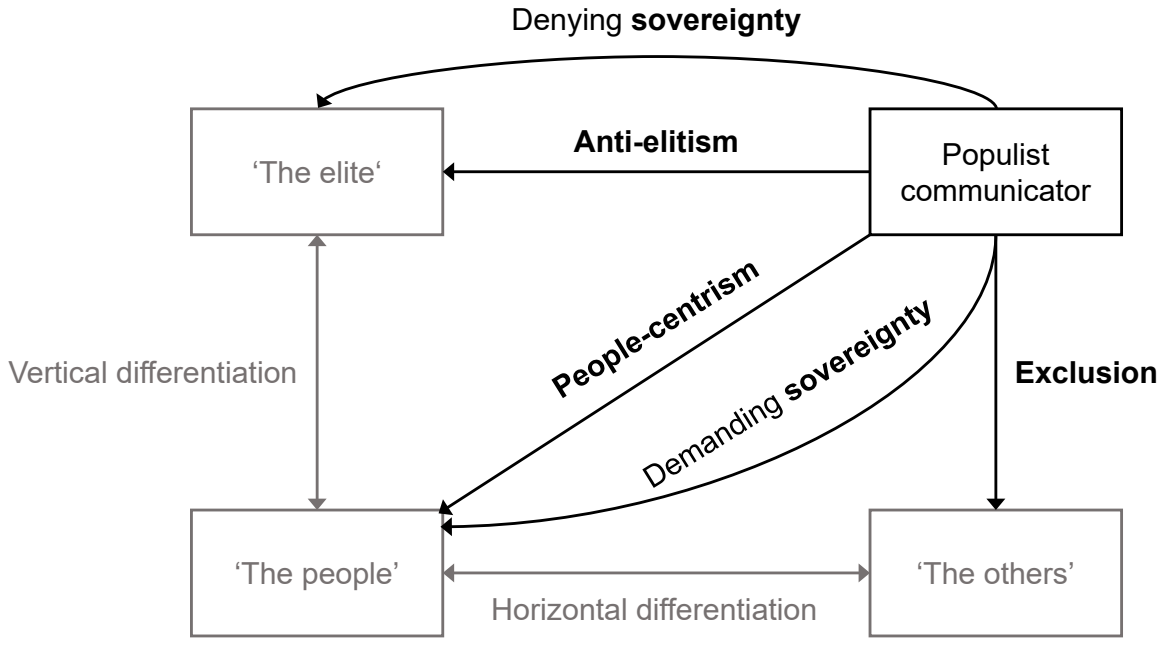

Figure 1: Core concepts of populist communication. Source: own presentation; also published in Blassnig et al. (2019).

These populist key messages are an expression of the core ideas of populist ideology and therefore focus on the *content* of populist communication *(what?)*.

This is in contrast to a populist communication *style*, which focuses on the form of populist communication *(how?)* (de Vreese et al., 2018; Engesser, Fawzi et al., 2017; Wirth et al., 2016). The use of populist key messages is often associated with the use of a characteristic set of style elements (Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019; Wettstein, Esser, Büchel et al., 2018), and it can even be argued that populist communication should ultimately be regarded as a combination of both messages and style (Ernst, Esser et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between these two aspects[5], since only populist *content* can theoretically be derived directly from populist ideology, while populism-related style elements are rather features of a "going popular" strategy (Kriesi, 2018, p. 12). Following an ideational approach, this thesis therefore focuses only on the *content* of populist communication in the form of populist key messages and disregards populist *style* elements.

To summarize, on the supply side, populism can be investigated in the form of populist communication that manifests in political discourse. Populist ideology can be communicated by various actors by means of specific populist key messages. From a political communication perspective, three key actor groups are of particular interest as populist communicators: *political actors, the media,* and *citizens* (de Vreese et al., 2018). These groups and their interactions are specifically relevant with regard to populist *online* communication, which will be elaborated in Chapter 3. First, however, the next chapter will outline the demand side of populism.

2.3 Demand Side: Populist Attitudes & Effects

Whereas populist ideas predominantly become visible in the populist communication of political actors or in the mass media on the supply side, populist ideas can also be conceived as a set of beliefs or populist attitudes at the mass or individual level (A. Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018). Populist attitudes can be defined as the degree of agreement with populist ideology (A. Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz, Müller et al., 2018). Accordingly, someone who supports populist ideology perceives the people as homogeneous and virtuous, has a negative attitude toward the elite, and supports the demand for more popular sovereignty. Although political actors or media actors can hold populist attitudes as well, this perspective is most often used to examine the appeal of populist ideas to citizens on the demand side. In surveys, populist attitudes can be

[5] Jagers and Walgrave (2007) speak of populism as a "political communication style" but use elements that I would consider ideological. Other authors (most notably Moffitt, 2016) mix populist ideas and style elements.

measured based on the same core ideas as populist communication: *people-centrism*, *anti-elitism*, and *popular sovereignty*[6] (Schulz, Müller et al., 2018).

Populist attitudes can be conceived of as a latent demand or a disposition (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018). This understanding can be related to the conception of populism as a cognitive schema related to the core ideas of populist ideology—a "populism schema"—that may be activated by populist communication (Krämer, 2014). Populist communication can therefore be expected to have priming effects (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002) that make the populist attitudes of recipients more salient (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 9; Krämer, 2014). Priming, specifically media priming, in general assumes that mediated content affects people's subsequent judgments or behaviors by increasing the (short-term) accessibility of certain concepts in the memory of recipients, thus increasing the likelihood that recipients use these same concepts in their subsequent judgments or evaluations (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). Accordingly, populist communication activates the preexisting populist attitudes of citizens by making those attitudes more salient. This activation increases the likelihood that these populist attitudes affect the evaluation of the message and, furthermore, may bias message processing toward elements that are congruent with the populism schema (Galambos, Abelson, & Black, 1986; Lodge & Hamill, 1986).

Similarly, Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2018) argue that populist attitudes can be activated through context and framing. From a framing perspective, populist ideas may serve as an interpretative framework for various events (Wirz, 2019, p. 35). Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2018, p. 9) further identify three cognitive mechanisms involved in populist framing that are also addressed by other researchers with regard to persuasion processes of populist communication. First, populist communication often includes a "*dispositional attribution of blame*" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 9). Hameleers et al. (2017a) and Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) also emphasize the central role of blame attributions against the elites and other outgroups in populist messages with regard to audience effects. Second, based on social identity theory, it can be argued that populist communication invokes specific in-group and out-group identities (Hameleers et al., 2017a; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 9; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018): the pure 'people' as in-group against the corrupt elites and dangerous 'others' as out-groups (Hameleers et al., 2018b). Third, populist communication may trigger effects via emotional persuasion pro-

[6] Most established definitions and measures of populist attitudes do not include the *exclusion of 'others'* as a core element. Some studies additionally include anti-immigrant attitudes (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2016), which are then, however, only applicable to right-wing populism.

cesses (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 9; Wirz, 2018b), since populism is often associated with an emotionalized style (Bos et al., 2010; Canovan, 1999; Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017a). Populist messages can be explicitly emotional or include characteristics that make them more likely to elicit emotional responses through appraisal processes (Wirz, 2018b).

Previous research has examined the effect of populist communication on different attitudes or behaviors. It has been shown that populist communication can influence populist attitudes (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017), attitudes toward migrants (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Wirz et al., 2018), emotions (Wirz, 2018b; Wirz et al., 2018), the perception of political actors (e.g., Bos et al., 2013), voting behavior (e.g., Sheets et al., 2016), and political engagement (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018). Furthermore, the results of most of these studies indicate that the effects of populist communication are dependent on certain characteristics of the recipients or the sender. Not all groups are equally susceptible to populist communication (Wirz, 2019, p. 24). For example, Müller et al. (2017) find that exposure to populist messages in the news only leads to more populist attitudes among citizens who already agreed with populist ideas beforehand. Findings by Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) indicate that the effect of populist communication on populist attitudes depends on the support for the source of the message. More recently, research has also started to analyze the effects of populist communication on user reactions on social media, relying on content analysis instead of surveys or experiments (Bobba, 2018; Bobba, Cremonesi, Mancosu, & Seddone, 2018). However, research on the effects of populist communication on behavior is still less common than research on attitudinal effects.

To summarize, on the demand side, populism manifests in the form of populist attitudes of citizens at the individual or aggregated mass level. These populist attitudes can be activated by populist communication. Furthermore, populist communication is expected to have effects on different attitudes and behaviors of citizens that may be explained theoretically by priming, framing, blame attributions, social identity theory, or emotional persuasion processes. While research on the effects of populist communication has increased, research specifically focusing on populist *online* communication as well as the manifest behavior of citizens is still scarce. However, these topics may be especially relevant because the role of citizens has become more central in political online communication, and the interactions between politicians, journalists, and citizens have become more direct and immediate, as will be elaborated in the next chapter.

3 POPULIST ONLINE COMMUNICATION

In the late 1990s, Bimber (1998, p. 137) voiced the notion that the Internet has the potential "to restructure political power in a populist direction." A few years later, Blumler (2001, p. 204) cautioned that in the third age, political communication is becoming more populist. Similarly, more recent literature suggests that online and social media provide specific opportunity structures for populist communication and populist actors (i.a., Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017; Engesser, Fawzi et al., 2017). However, within a *hybrid media system,* older and newer media logics compete and complement each other (Chadwick, 2017, p. 207). This hybridity becomes visible in the interplay not only between online and offline communication (Pfetsch, Adam, & Lance Bennett, 2014) but also *within* political online communication. In addition to noninstitutionalized online communication platforms such as social media, traditional, well-known media brands have established themselves online (see, e.g., Humprecht, 2016). Therefore, different areas of political online communication follow different media logics, which may influence their roles as platforms for populist communication. Furthermore, online media allow for a more direct interaction between politicians, journalists, and citizens within the same platforms and therefore potentially change the relationship between these three actor groups. Therefore, in this dissertation, populist online communication is conceptualized as the interplay between (1) populist communication in politicians' online self-presentation, (2) journalists' online media representation of populist communication, and (3) citizens' responses to this written and posted content in the form of audience reactions (see Figure 2). These three key actor groups, their roles in the dissemination of populist online communication, and the effects of populist online communication will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

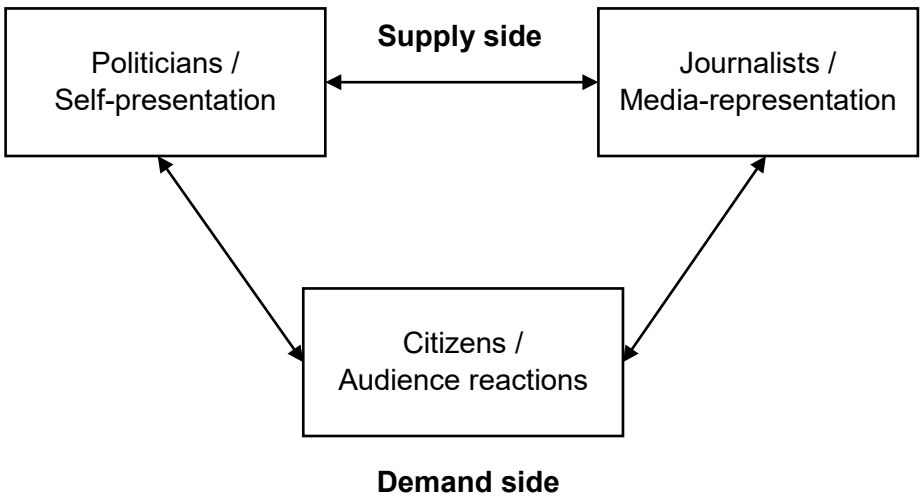

Figure 2: Three key actor groups of populist online communication. Source: own representation.

3.1 Politicians: Populist Self-Presentation

Because populism is an inherently political phenomenon, political actors have traditionally been the starting point for research on populism. Earlier research has mostly followed an *actor-centered* approach by focusing on political actors that were defined a priori as populist, investigating factors that might explain their presence and electoral strength and identifying their common communication strategies and styles (Stanyer et al., 2017). As elaborated in Chapter 2, this dissertation follows a *communication-centered* approach (Stanyer et al., 2017). First, this approach focuses on politicians in their role as communicators. Second, it assumes that politicians' communication can be populist to varying degrees. Third, this assumption leads to the question of what factors might explain the use of populist key messages. Therefore, this chapter focuses on politicians' self-presentation and on possible drivers of populist communication, specifically with regard to characteristics of the communication channel and parties.

The role of politicians as communicators and, thus, their self-presentation, has increased enormously in importance in the environment of increasing mediatization and personalization of politics (Esser, 2013, p. 163; Sheafer, Shenhav, & Balmas, 2014, pp. 217–218). The self-presentational side of politics mostly follows the *politics* aspect of political logic, which is more power-oriented, more public, and more focused on tactics and strategies, in contrast to *policy* or *polity* logic (Esser, 2013, p. 165; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014, p. 15). These characteristics can be linked to Landerer's (2013) conceptualization of a *market logic* as distinct from a *normative logic* of political communication. Whereas normative logic is more value-oriented, elitist, supply-driven, and aims at problem solving, market logic is more concerned with the maximization of self-interested goals (e.g., vote share), more audience-oriented, demand-driven, and follows the imperative of newsworthiness (Landerer, 2013, p. 249). Thus, the self-presentation of politicians has not only become more important—it can also be expected to be specifically prone to populist communication due to its audience- and demand-orientation and its susceptibility to (self-)mediatization.

Whereas studies of politicians' self-presentation have often investigated television news, debates, or talk-shows (Baum, 2005; Bucy & Grabe, 2007; Schütz, 1992, 1995), research on populism has long focused on party or election manifestos (Rooduijn, 2014b; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Rooduijn, De Lange, & van der Brug, 2014) or political speeches (Hawkins, 2009, 2010). An early exception was a study by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) that investigated the use of populist communication in the political party broadcasts (PPB) of Belgian parties. As the communication perspective has become more prevalent, research has started to compare

populism across different communication channels. Cranmer (2011) compared speeches by Swiss politicians in parliamentary committees, open parliamentary floors, and political talk shows and found that a public setting, specifically talk shows, was favorable for populist communication. Comparing Dutch political leaders' statements in newspapers, television news, talk shows, and PPB, Bos and Brants (2014) concluded that talk shows and PPB were especially prone to populist communication. These results indicate that, on the one hand, a public setting and, on the other hand, media channels where politicians have a higher control may be beneficial for populist communication.

With an increasingly interventionist approach of journalistic news, politicians may look for other communication channels that offer them the opportunity to present themselves with less journalistic interference (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Paletz, 2002). In hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017), politicians increasingly use a mix of various media outlets for self-presentational purposes. Digital media, specifically social media, have become a central alternative to television (Lee, 2013, 953; Stanyer, 2008, p. 415). Similar to political or entertainment talk shows, social media in themselves can be considered a hybrid form of mediality, in which different media or communication logics merge and collide (e.g., Iannelli & Giglietto, 2015). Thus, both talk shows and social media offer politicians a combination of broad reach and control that may be especially appealing for populist actors whose aim is to reach a large following in as unmediated a way as possible.

As summarized in *Article III,* characteristics of *social media logic* (e.g., van Dijck & Poell, 2013) or *network media logic* (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) offer several opportunity structures for populist communication and populist actors (see also Ernst, 2019). First, social media provide political actors with more possibilities for the personalization of content and communication (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016), permitting populist actors to portray themselves as approachable, ordinary, and no different than the 'common (wo)man'. This approach conforms to populist actors' self-presentation as belonging to the people, in contrast to all the other politicians who are part of the elite. Second, social media allow for more direct communication and, thus, for a closer, more personal, or more "human" opportunity to make contact with voters (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 23). This more direct connection with the people complies with the dimension of people-centrism and specifically with populism's claim to a "direct, unmediated access to the people's grievances" and the self-perception of populist actors as "spokesperson[s] of the vox populi" (Kriesi, 2014, p. 363). Third, social media allow political actors to circumvent traditional gatekeepers such as journalists and directly reach a large audience (e.g., Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). This allows populist actors to stand up against the elite, specifically the media elite or mainstream

media, and question their legitimacy, for example, by criticizing them as the "lying press" or "Lügenpresse". Fourth, social media provide political actors with the opportunity to better target specific groups, "like-minded others", or "kindred souls" (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 24). Thus, politicians can reach groups that are electorally or ideologically important to them and strengthen or expand their community (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). The opportunity to better target specific groups also enables populist actors to attack the elite, exclude commonly perceived outgroups, or use uncivil language within their network without having to fear criticism from political opponents or critical journalists (Engesser, Ernst et al., 2017). Finally, the network characteristics of social media mean that politicians not only reach their direct followers but also potentially second-degree and even more distant connections (Kruikemeier, 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2004). The speed and magnitude of these social networking sites can ultimately lead to a virality of specific contents (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 22), which is why some researchers also speak of a *logic of virality* (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Nahon, Hemsley, Walker, & Hussain, 2011). The prerequisite for virality is the interactivity of citizens with politicians' posts, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.3.

From this perspective, social media may be beneficial platforms to communicate populist ideas. However, as I argue in *Article I*, in contrast to highly mediatized formats such as political talk shows, social media also provide politicians with an environment where they have more control and are potentially less compelled to adapt their communication to the mass media logic (Sheafer et al., 2014, p. 221). Therefore, by bypassing traditional media, these communication channels could also allow politicians to take back control that they had seemingly lost due to an increasing mediatization, and focus more on a political logic or normative logic that is less prone to populist communication (Blumler, 2016). In turn, social media may also serve as a new, inexpensive, and easy-to-use communication channel to influence the agendas and frames of journalists and, thus, gain attention in traditional mass media (Chadwick, 2017; Enli & Simonsen, 2018; Kreiss, 2016). In fact, studies have found that politicians adapt their communication on Twitter in anticipation of news coverage (Verdegem & D'heer, 2018). From this viewpoint, communication on social media is still highly related to the media logic of mainstream mass media (Enli & Simonsen, 2018).

In addition to different communication platforms, specific characteristics of political parties and actors have been identified as drivers of populist communication in politicians' self-presentation. Previous research has shown that extreme parties on both ends of the political spectrum are specifically likely to use populist key messages in party manifestos (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017), press releases (Bernhard, 2016), and on social media (Ernst et al., 2017). This may be explained by

their frequent antagonism to the government or mainstream parties, their emphasis on responsiveness to the interests of ordinary citizens over responsibility (R. S. Katz & Mair, 2009; Mair, 2002), and a need to compensate for their weak party organization with a more elaborate or aggressive communication strategy (Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019; Müller-Rommel, 1998). Furthermore, it has proven fruitful to combine a communication- and actor-centered approach comparing politicians of predefined populist parties with politicians of typically nonpopulist parties in their use of populist communication. As Ernst, Esser et al. (2019) show, politicians of typically populist parties not only communicate in a more populist manner; this difference is especially apparent in their social media communication as well as in their success at breaking into news media coverage with their populist messages.

To summarize, characteristics of the communication channel—news media logic, network media logic, or generally a highly audience-oriented logic—as well as characteristics of parties—an extreme ideological position or typically populist parties—may act as drivers of populism in politicians' self-presentation. Therefore, in this dissertation, the populist communication of politicians will be compared across different communication channels as well as across the political spectrum and different party types with regard to both its drivers (see *Article I*) and its effects on citizens' reactions (see *Article III* & *V*).

3.2 Journalists: Populist Media Representation

Despite the growing importance of social media, the news media still play a central role in political communication—specifically with regard to populist online communication. Political actors—and populist actors—continue to be largely dependent on the mass media to gain prominence and to reach a large audience (e.g., Hopmann, 2014). In turn, the news media tend to notice and report on populist statements, as they are often dramatic and controversial and thus correspond to news values or media logic (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008). Therefore, also in the digital age, media representation and the role of journalists are crucial to understanding populist communication (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017). With online media representation, I refer to the propagation and dissemination of populist ideas in the form of populist communication in online news media. This may occur directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018, p. 478). Therefore, it is important to distinguish between populism *by* the media and populism *through* the media, as suggested by Esser et al. (2017).

First, populism *by* the media is closely related to the concept of a *media populism* (Krämer, 2014), according to which the media can express populist ideas themselves. Thus, media outlets or journalists may present themselves as the voice of

the people, promote anti-elitism, or construct in-groups and out-groups (Mazzoleni, 2014). In this sense, journalists can act as *originators* or *initiators* of populist messages (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018, p. 479). Reasons for this may be politically motivated media ownership (Esser et al., 2017), a specific journalistic perspective as advocate of the people, or an anti-establishment bias of the media (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018). However, a populist reporting style may also be motivated by economic opportunism as a means to gain attention and reach large audiences (Krämer, 2014; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018).

Second, described as populism *through* the media, the news media can disseminate and thereby reinforce populist messages by other actors, mostly by politicians (Esser et al., 2017). According to this perspective, intentionally or unintentionally, the media can provide a favorable platform for populism that multiplies and amplifies populist messages by political actors (Mazzoleni, 2014). This view is largely based on the assumption that populist communication has high newsworthiness and good compatibility with media logic, specifically commercial media logic (Esser et al., 2017, p. 369; Mazzoleni, 2008, pp. 54–55). Additionally, populism through the media may be fostered by issue ownership of populist parties, the event environment and national issue culture, and a strict understanding of balance and fair access (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018, p. 478). Thus, journalists act as *gatekeepers* that "may open or close the news gates to populist political actors" (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018, p. 478).

Third, journalists can also act as *interpreters* of populist messages. Whereas in their role as gatekeepers, journalists may disseminate populist messages by politicians neutrally according to news values, journalists can also evaluate populist actors and their messages positively or negatively (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018, p. 479). Hence, in their interpretive role, journalists can attenuate or amplify, criticize or legitimize populist messages by politicians. Explanations for a positive evaluation of populist messages may be similar as those for populism *by* the media. Other reasons may be a parallelism to populist parties or media advocacy for an issue owned by populist actors (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018). Criticism of populist messages or actors may in turn result from the journalistic perception of populism as a threat to liberal democracy, checks-and-balances institutions, or the freedom of the media (Esser et al., 2017; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018).

The complex relationship between populism and the media has been discussed theoretically (Esser et al., 2017; Mazzoleni, 2003, 2008, 2014) and analyzed empirically in various traditional mass media channels such as the press (T. Akkerman, 2011; Bos et al., 2010; Rooduijn, 2014a; Wettstein, Esser, Büchel et al., 2018;

Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018), or TV and radio newscasts (Bos et al., 2011; van der Pas, Vries, & van der Brug, 2013). However, the specific role of *online* news media with regard to populist communication has been largely neglected. Recent literature suggests that—similar to social media—*online* news media provide specific opportunity structures for populist communication (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017; Engesser, Fawzi et al., 2017). As elaborated in *Article II*, four characteristics can be identified that may foster populist communication in online news. First, similar to social media, online news media allow for a more direct connection to the people due to potentially lower levels of gatekeeping (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), an increasing audience orientation by facilitating direct feedback from readers (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017), and better opportunities for nonelite actors to enter the news cycle (Chadwick, 2017). Second, the attention economy of the Internet may further increase an orientation toward media logic. Three aspects of media logic are especially favorable for populist communication according to Esser et al. (2017): conflict framing, strategic framing, and personalization. These aspects may be associated with attention-driven as well as interpretative or opinion-oriented journalism (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2008; Hameleers et al., 2017b). Third, this favorability may be reinforced by an increasing commercialization of online news outlets due to declining or stagnant numbers of subscriptions (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019), a mostly advertisement-based business model (Nielsen, 2016), and an increasing focus on high click rates, audience metrics, and speed (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Finally, although online news outlets of traditional mass media are still dominated by mass media logic, they are increasingly influenced by a network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). This influence is reflected in the fact that the dissemination of news via social media as well as the active participation of readers in the form of likes, shares, or comments have become increasingly important (e.g., Hille & Bakker, 2014; Villi, Matikainen, & Khaldarova, 2016). In addition to network media logic, this may further imply an increasing importance of the audience—in their role as the public, consumers, and as citizens—in relation to the media and politics (Brants & van Praag, 2015).

To summarize, the news media are crucial for the wider dissemination of populist communication, and journalists can take on different roles as originators, gatekeepers, or interpreters of populist messages. In online news outlets, journalists may be specifically likely to voice or cite populist statements due to an increasing audience orientation, the attention economy, commercialization, and an orientation toward news values and network media logic. Additionally, specific characteristics of news coverage, such as opinion-oriented formats or interpretative journalism, may act as drivers of populist online communication. Finally, these

tendencies may be reinforced by soliciting the active feedback, distribution, and participation of readers. Therefore, the next chapter focuses on the role of citizens as a third key-actor group with regard to populist online communication.

3.3 Citizens: Reactions to Populist Communication

Based on the central role of 'the people' in populist ideology, one could argue that citizens lie at the heart of populist communication. However, research on populist communication has long considered citizens either as an abstract object of populist communication or in an aggregated form as a source of electoral support for populist actors (de Vreese et al., 2018). With an increasing audience-orientation and more possibilities for citizens' direct feedback in an online environment, as well as with a growing interest in the effects of populist communication, citizens have become a more central actor group for populist communication.

On the one hand, citizens are *recipients* of and *audiences* for mediated populist messages by politicians and journalists (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 430; Reinemann et al., 2017, p. 23). This perspective raises questions about the effects of populist communication on citizens, which have long been neglected in research on populism. Furthermore, this is connected to research on citizens' populist attitudes and how these attitudes may be affected by or moderate effects of populist communication (i.a., Hameleers et al., 2017a; Müller et al., 2017; Schulz, Müller et al., 2018). On the other hand, citizens can also be regarded as *actors* in the communicative interactions of populist communication (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 430). Particularly online, citizens can react to or engage with populist messages in online news coverage or with messages shared by politicians on social media platforms by liking or sharing them. Citizens can also evaluate populist ideas or initiate populist messages themselves by commenting on news articles or social media posts (Esser et al., 2017). Moreover, citizens' active reactions on social media platforms and news websites manifest in digital trace data, allowing us to investigate the effects of populist communication based on the manifest behavior of citizens. In my dissertation, I therefore combine these two perspectives by examining the effects of populist communication on citizens as *recipients* and on their subsequent behavior as *actors* in populist communicative interactions. In the following, I will discuss three aspects that are the focus of this dissertation with regard to citizens' reactions to populist communication: (1) user reactions to populist communication in the form of popularity cues; (2) reader comments as populist citizen journalism; and (3) how the former two aspects can be connected to an effects perspective.

3.3.1 Popularity Cues: Is Populism Popular?

Following the network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1248), gaining relevant resonance both within social media platforms and to some extent in online mass media depends on the ability to publish content that users will recirculate within their larger networks, comment on, and recommend to other users. In this way, social media posts can reach a secondary audience in addition to the primary audience of the direct followers (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). The logic of this two-step flow of communication (E. Katz, 1957) privileges popular content over unpopular content both from the supply side and the demand side. On the supply side, politicians want to publish content that resonates with their followers and gains a large amount of attention. Followers' reactions to tweets or Facebook posts, such as likes or shares, help politicians reach wider audiences. Furthermore, a high level of social media popularity may render political actors and their messages more newsworthy (Fürst & Oehmer, 2018) and give them more attention in traditional media (Chadwick, 2017). Likewise, online news outlets rely increasingly on social media as platforms for distribution as well as on social plugins on their websites to increase their audience reach (e.g., Hille & Bakker, 2014; Villi et al., 2016). On the demand side, citizens use popularity as a selection criterion to navigate the high-choice online media environment (Porten-Cheé, Haßler, Jost, Eilders, & Maurer, 2018) and to decide what content to click on, read, or engage with themselves (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005).

The popularity of a social media post or a news item manifests in the form of *popularity cues* (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018). In a broad sense, popularity cues represent "*metric information about users' behavior or their evaluations of entities*" (Haim, Kümpel, & Brosius, 2018, p. 190, emphasis i.o.) and, thus, a specific form of *digital trace data* (Jungherr, 2015). More specifically, following Porten-Cheé et al. (2018, p. 211), *popularity cues* can be defined as user reactions such as likes, shares, and other metrics that indicate the assignment of attention and relevance to, or endorsement of and support for social media messages or online news items. Importantly, popularity cues neither necessarily imply (reciprocal) interaction nor actual attention paid to the content of a post or article by individual users—they are rather a proxy for popularity or reach. Depending on the online platform, different options for user reactions are provided that can be differentiated with regard to their degree of activation (Berger & Milkman, 2010) and the user intention behind them (Bene, 2017a). With regard to Facebook and Twitter, which will be the focus of *Article III*, the most important popularity cues are *likes* and *shares* (respectively *retweets* for Twitter). Although both liking and sharing can be interpreted as mainly positive reactions to a (political) message, sharing a post seems to be the result of

a process of higher elaboration. Moreover, liking mainly indicates a positive evaluation of a message, whereas the motive for sharing seems to be the perceived relevance for the peer group (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 214). Regardless of users' motives, both likes and shares contribute to higher popularity and possibly to virality on social media.

As elaborated in *Articles III*, *IV*, and *V*, populist communication may be positively associated with popularity cues for three reasons: (1) Populist communication's potential as a political mobilization strategy may stimulate the political participation of otherwise marginalized or inactive groups (Jansen, 2011). (2) The high news value and compatibility with the media logic of populist actors and populist communication (Mazzoleni, 2008) may translate into a high shareworthiness (Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2016). (3) Populist key messages frequently cooccur with specific populism-related stylistic devices such as negativity, emotionalization, and personalization (Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019) that have been identified as positive factors influencing the number of popularity cues (Bene, 2017a, 2017b; Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2018; Staender, Ernst, & Steppat, 2019). Thus, both populist messages and populist actors may act as drivers of popularity cues. This is also supported by initial empirical evidence (Bobba, 2018).

Consequently, by liking or sharing populist messages or articles, whether willingly or unwillingly, citizens can disseminate populist ideas by contributing to a higher popularity of and larger audience for these messages. Additionally, as mentioned above, readers may express populist ideas themselves on social media. In the following, this second aspect will be elaborated more closely with a specific focus on reader comments.

3.3.2 Reader Comments: Populist Citizen Journalism

Reader comments can be considered a special type of popularity cue. On the one hand, similarly to likes and shares, they contribute to high click rates and a higher reach (e.g., Anderson, 2011; Bene, 2017a). On the other hand, commenting allows readers to express their own evaluations and opinions as a direct response to online news articles and interact with other commenters. Moreover, reader comments can significantly influence citizens' perceptions of public opinion and even change readers' personal opinions (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 467). As discussed in more detail in *Article IV*, reader comments are associated both with positive developments, e.g., the potential to contribute to a deliberative online public sphere (Dahlberg, 2011), as well as with negative consequences, e.g., incivility, hate speech, or echo chambers (e.g., Coe, Kenski, & Rains,

2014; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015), for the online public sphere. Furthermore, as I argue in *Articles II* and *IV*, reader comments may provide a specifically fertile ground for populist communication by citizens.

Comment functions offer citizens the opportunity to react to populist statements by politicians and journalists as well as to publicly express populist ideas themselves. Esser et al. (2017) refer to this as *populist citizen journalism* and regard it as a third aspect, in addition to populism *by* and *through* the media. From this perspective, journalists again take on a role as gatekeepers: They may simultaneously be rather restrictive with regard to populist communication in news articles, while opening the gates to populist messages by citizens in the form of reader comments (Esser et al., 2017, p. 371). This assumption assumes that reader comments are less constrained by editorial gatekeeping processes and journalistic norms. Thus, online mass media may provide a platform not only for populist messages by politicians, as described by populism *through* the media, but also by citizens. Similar to populism in news articles, this may be driven by economic opportunism and (network) media logic—high numbers of reader comments generate website traffic and high click rates (Anderson, 2011).

Additionally, the different functions of reader comments may render them specifically prone to populist communication. Reader comments may serve as *liberal individualist, communitarian* (Freelon, 2015) or *counter public spaces* (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). From a *liberal individualist perspective*, journalists may accept the violation of civility or deliberativeness in favor of uninhibited self-expression by readers (Freelon, 2015). This is reminiscent of an emphasis on the freedom of expression and the opposition to political correctness that are often associated with populist actors (e.g., Mudde, 2004). As *communitarian spaces*, comment sections may enable collaboration with like-minded others, community building around specific ideological goals, and also demarcation from outsiders (Freelon, 2015), implying the identification of a homogenous collective in-group and specific out-groups as well as an 'us' vs. 'them' rhetoric that are also inherent in populist communication. Finally, as *counter publics,* reader comments may constitute a space where citizens can challenge or deviate from the media or public sphere that are perceived as mainstream or dominant (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). This again suggests the construction of in-groups and out-groups as well as an antagonism against the establishment that often includes the mainstream media (Esser et al., 2017).

These different functions of comment sections could foster the use of populist communication by citizens in reader comments in general. However, populist reader comments may also be interpreted as direct reactions to the news articles they respond to. Therefore, they are likely to be affected by the characteristics of

these articles, e.g., whether these articles include populist key messages or not. This will be discussed in the following section.

3.3.3 Citizens' Reactions as Effects of Populist Communication

As direct responses to social media posts or news articles, popularity cues and reader comments are influenced by the content and characteristics of the posts or articles (e.g., Bene, 2017a; Staender et al., 2019; Trilling et al., 2016; Ziegele, Quiring, Esau, & Friess, 2018). From a demand-side perspective, popularity cues and (populist) reader comments can therefore also be regarded as the manifestation of effects of populist communication that may be explained by different persuasion processes.

As addressed in Chapter 2.3, from the perspective of social identity theory, populist communication activates specific in-group and out-group identities: 'the good people' vs. 'the bad elite' or 'the dangerous others' (Hameleers et al., 2017a; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018; Schulz, Wirth et al., 2018). According to the social identity model of collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), this identification with the people as an in-group that is seemingly threatened by the elite or the others may have a mobilization effect and promote the likelihood that citizens will become politically engaged (Hameleers et al., 2018; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). As Porten-Cheé et al. (2018, p. 213) argue, liking an online item may present a low-threshold way to support certain political positions and influence public opinion on the user level. Similarly, sharing can be regarded as a means of promoting certain political issues and positions and of gradually influencing what fellow users perceive to be important issues on a visible micro level (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 214). Finally, commenting allows an explicit expression of political opinions that may either support or criticize the content of the original post or article (e.g., Bene, 2017a). Thus, a mobilization effect based on the activation of specific social identities may increase the likelihood that recipients like, share, or comment on populist content. Additionally, an increased use of popularity cues could also be explained by emotional persuasion processes (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018; Wirz, 2018b). As Wirz (2018b) has shown, populist appeals elicit stronger emotions than nonpopulist appeals, and these emotions—specifically anger and hope—increase the persuasiveness of populist communication. Such affective reactions may also increase citizens' likelihood to like, share, or comment on populist messages.

The effects of populist communication on user reactions and specifically the triggering of populist reader comments may be further explained based on schema theory, priming, and framing. Following schema theory (see also Chapter 2.3),

populist messages can activate a cognitive "populism schema" in recipients' memories. Thus, populist communication may have priming effects that make latent populist attitudes of recipients more salient and thus increase the likelihood that citizens apply this populism schema in their subsequent judgments or evaluations in response to a message (Krämer, 2014; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). On the one hand, this increased salience of populist attitudes may lead to a more positive evaluation of the populist message. On the other hand, the increased (short-term) accessibility of a populism concept in the memory of recipients may lead to an increased likelihood that citizens also use populist messages in reader comments responding to populist news articles (Galambos et al., 1986; Lodge & Hamill, 1986). From a framing perspective, similar effects of populist communication on recipients' attitudes or evaluations may be explained via value framing (Wirz, 2018a) or blame attributions (Hameleers et al., 2017a).

As elaborated in Chapter 2.3, populist attitudes are relatively stable and are only marginally affected by (short-term) exposure to populist communication. Furthermore, based on schema theory, we can assume that populist communication mainly activates or reinforces prior populist attitudes. This assumption suggests that preexisting populist attitudes act as a moderator of the effects of populist communication. This is also supported by previous empirical research that shows that exposure to populist messages in the mass media only increases populist attitudes for citizens who already had strong populist attitudes beforehand (Müller et al., 2017). Similarly, experiments found that the effects of populist messages were moderated by people's identification with the sender of the message (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017) or their feeling of relative deprivation (Hameleers et al., 2018b). Applied to citizens' reactions in the form of popularity cues or reader comments, one can similarly assume that on a micro level, populist communication will not lead to a higher willingness for every citizen to like or share a populist message or express populist messages themselves. Instead, it can be expected that these effects are moderated by citizens' populist attitudes. Because user reactions can be mainly interpreted as positive reactions to a message, citizens with strong populist attitudes are expected to like, share, or comment on a populist message, whereas for citizens with low populist attitudes, one would expect a reactance effect (see also Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

To summarize, we can assume that (1) populist communication leads to more popularity cues and reader comments (see *Articles III*, *IV*, & *V*); (2) reader comments are generally specifically prone to populist communication by citizens (see *Article II*); (3) populist communication in news articles elicits populist communication by citizens in reader comments (see *Article IV*); and (4) that these effects are moderated by citizens' prior populist attitudes (see *Article V*).

4 METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

This dissertation draws on four data collections to investigate populist online communication across different countries and communication contexts. It analyzes social media posts of politicians, online news media content, and their effects on citizens' reactions in the form of popularity cues and reader comments in up to six countries. Thereby, it draws on quantitative content analysis, digital trace data, and an online survey experiment to combine the supply and demand sides and to complement the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches. In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the comparative approach, the research designs and data for the individual studies, and the operationalization of populist communication. More details on the methods, samples, and operationalization for the individual papers can be found in Chapter 5 and in the original articles in the appendix.

4.1 Comparative Approach

This dissertation follows a comparative approach, analyzing the manifestation of populist communication and its effects across different countries, communication channels, and actor types. All content analyses (*Articles I-IV*) include several countries in their research design. However, they differ somewhat in their approach.

Article I follows the most explicit comparative approach by comparing the use of populist communication across four countries—Switzerland (CH), Germany (DE), the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US)—and by investigating structural aspects on the macro level as explanatory factors. The four countries were chosen because, on the one hand, they are broadly similar, as all selected countries are established Western democracies that have seen a rise of populist actors or movements in the last few years. On the other hand, they distinguish themselves with regard to several dimensions of their political systems, notably with regard to their systems of government and electoral systems. This allows investigating politicians' use of populist communication in varying political and electoral settings and explaining differences and similarities through different contextual settings (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012).

In *Articles II*, *III*, and *IV*, the comparative approach serves more as a comparison of relations, in which the different contexts work as a robustness check and enable a higher generalizability of the findings within Western Europe (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). Thus, in these articles, we regard populism as a transnational phenomenon and test different relations, for example, between populism in news articles and reader comments, or between populist communication and popularity cues, across varying contexts. *Articles II* and *IV* follow a most different systems

within most similar systems design in the selection of the countries. They include three countries—CH, FR, and UK—that have similar political, economic, and cultural settings within Western Europe, hosted national elections between 2015 and 2017, and saw rather successful (right-wing) populist parties in the last European or national elections. On the other hand, they again differ with regard to their types of political systems and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Lijphart, 1999). For *Article III*, six Western democracies were selected: Switzerland (CH), Germany (DE), France (FR), Italy (IT), the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US). This sample provides even more diverse contexts, with variability regarding parliamentary vs. presidential systems, representative vs. directional systems, consensus vs. majoritarian systems, strong vs. weak standing of populist parties (in parliament or public opinion), and higher vs. lower consumption of social media for political information purposes (Aalberg et al., 2017; Newman, Fletcher, Levy, & Nielsen, 2016).

4.2 Research Design & Data

Article I is based on a quantitative content analysis of politicians' statements in political talk shows and on social media (Facebook & Twitter) in four countries (CH, DE, UK, US). The original material was collected by the National Center of Competence in Research on 'Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century' (NCCR Democracy), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF). The material was then coded by the author of this dissertation. This study focuses on politicians' self-presentation and includes statements by 74 politicians across the political spectrum during a routine time in 2014 (N = 2,454).

Articles II and *IV* draw on a quantitative content analysis of online news coverage related to the topic of immigration and responding reader comments during national election campaigns in France (2017), Switzerland (2015), and the United Kingdom (2015). These data were collected and coded within the project "Populist Online Communication in Europe: Self-Presentation, Media Representation, and Audience Reconstruction of Political Actors", funded by the SNF. The data set includes N = 493 news articles from 14 online media outlets and N = 2,904 reader comments.

Article III is based on a quantitative content analysis for which the data were collected and coded by the NCCR Democracy, funded by the SNF. The data include Facebook posts and tweets from 36 political leaders of 29 parties (N = 566) across six countries (CH, DE, FR, IT, UK, US) during a routine time in 2015.

Finally, *Article V* draws on data from an online survey experiment with a 2x2 design. The experiment was conducted in Switzerland in 2019. The participants

were recruited by Respondi[7] from its online access panel using quota sampling for age, gender, and education based on Eurostat data for German-speaking Facebook users in Switzerland (N = 647).

4.3 Operationalization of Populist Communication

The most crucial variable of this dissertation is populist communication. It serves as the dependent variable in *Articles I*, *II*, and *IV*, as an independent variable in *Articles III* and *IV*, and as the experimental factor in *Article V*. Its operationalization was derived directly from the theoretical definition of populist ideology discussed in Chapter 2.1, building on previous literature (Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016). Overall, populist communication is regarded as a formative measure (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, & Roth, 2008), based on the four dimensions people-centrism, anti-elitism, restoring sovereignty, and the exclusion of others, with each indicator capturing a specific aspect of the construct. These dimensions were measured mainly based on the twelve populist key messages discussed in Chapter 2.2 and summarized in Table 1.

Due to the cumulative nature of this dissertation, the operationalization of populist communication varies slightly between the individual publications. In *Article I*, populist communication was operationalized based on three dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion, with the advocative aspect of restoring sovereignty—demanding the people's sovereignty—integrated within people-centrism. Whereas anti-elitism and exclusion were operationalized as summarized in Table 1, people-centrism was operationalized slightly differently and comprised five key messages based on Cranmer (2011): advocacy, accountability, legitimacy, describing the people as homogenous, and demanding the people's sovereignty. *Articles II* and *IV* followed the full operationalization outlined in Table 1 and described in more detail in Blassnig et al. (2019). For *Article III*, populist communication was operationalized building on the conceptualization from the NCCR democracy project described in Wirth et al. (2016). This operationalization is based on the three dimensions of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and restoring sovereignty, which are measured by the same corresponding nine key messages as described in Table 1. However, this minimal operationalization does not include the dimension of exclusion. Finally, in *Article V*, the populist stimulus also followed a minimal operationalization and included three populist key messages for people-centrism, anti-elitism, and demanding the people's sovereignty. These differences

[7] Respondi is a market research company that is a member of the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research and certified according to ISO 26362.

will be further discussed in Chapter 6.2 with regard to the limitations of this dissertation.

Table 1: Conceptualization and operationalization of populist key messages

Dimension	Key message	Description
People-centrism	Approaching the people	The speaker describes himself or is described as belonging to the people, being close to the people, knowing the people, speaking for the people, caring for the people, agreeing with the people or performing everyday actions. The speaker claims to represent or embody the people.
	Praising the people's virtues	The people are attributed positive traits such as morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc. The people are exempt from being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, etc.
	Praising the people's achievements	The people are described as being responsible for a positive development/situation, an achievement or benefit. Achievements include important, successful, 'right' actions or other accomplishments.
	Describing the people as homogenous	The people are described as sharing a common understanding of the world, common feelings, desires, opinions, or a common will.
Anti-elitism	Discrediting the elite	Negative personality traits, mistakes, and unlawful or immoral behavior of the elites are stressed. The elites are portrayed as corrupt, malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, evil, undemocratic, etc. The elite are called names and denied morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc.
	Blaming the elite	Elites are described as a threat/burden, or held responsible for negative developments/situations, specific failures, or as having committed specific mistakes or crimes.
	Detaching the elite from the people	Elites are described as not belonging to the people, not being close to the people, not knowing the people, not speaking for the people, not caring for the people, or not performing everyday actions.

Sovereignty	Demanding popular sovereignty	The speaker argues for general institutional reforms to grant the people more power by introducing direct-democratic elements or increasing political participation. The speaker argues in favor of granting more power to the people within the context of a specific issue (e.g., election, immigration, security).
	Denying elite sovereignty	The speaker argues in favor of granting less power to elites within the context of a specific issue (e.g., immigration, security).
Exclusion	Discrediting specific groups	Specific social groups or population segments are discredited, denounced, or stigmatized. They are portrayed as evil, criminal, lazy, stupid, immoral, dangerous, etc.
	Blaming specific groups	Specific social groups or population segments are held responsible for a negative, undesirable or harmful development/situation. They are described as not being responsible for a positive development or situation.
	Excluding specific groups	Specific societal groups or population segments are characterized as 'others', juxtaposed to 'the people', described as not belonging to the people, or not sharing their virtues.

5 INDIVIDUAL PUBLICATIONS & FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes the aim, research design, and major findings for each of the five articles that together form the basis of this synopsis. Certain terms have been adjusted, and the hypotheses of the individual articles were numbered consecutively across publications in favor of better comprehensibility and consolidation of the different contributions. The full articles can be found in the appendix.

5.1 *Article I:* Populist Communication in Talk Shows and Social Media: A Comparative Content Analysis in Four Countries

Article I focuses on populist communication in politicians' self-presentation. The aim of this study is to assess how politicians across the political spectrum employ three dimensions of populist communication—people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion—in their self-presentation across different contextual settings, namely, three communication platforms (political talk shows, Facebook, and Twitter) and four countries (DE, CH, UK, US). Following a communication-centered approach, we argue that politicians can be populist to varying degrees depending on different context factors on the macro level (system of government, electoral system) and the meso level (communication channel, party association), and we formulate three hypotheses. First, we focus on different systems of government and electoral systems as structural factors on the macro level. We argue that presidential systems (vs. parliamentary and directorial systems) and majoritarian electoral systems (vs. proportional systems) provide more incentives for populist communication due to a higher personalization, a more "plebiscitarian legitimacy" of presidents or the members or parliament (Linz, 1990; O'Donell, 1994), and a lower need to negotiate compromises or form coalitions (Kriesi, 2014; Lijphart, 1999; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). Therefore, we expect politicians' communication to be most populist in the United States, followed by the United Kingdom and Switzerland, and lowest in Germany (*H1*). Second, we compare the different communication channels. We conceptualize talk shows and social media as hybrid forms of mediality (Chadwick, 2017) that both provide a beneficial platform for populist communication by combining different media logics and offer politicians an ideal combination between outreach and control. Although we acknowledge that the network media logic of social media may foster populist communication, we expect politicians' communication to be more populist in talk shows (*H2*). This expectation is based on three characteristics of political talk shows: (a) their highly audience-oriented logic (Landerer, 2013); (b) their focus on the direct confrontation of political adversaries; and (c) a stronger orientation towards media logic and its apprehension by politicians. Third, we compare politicians of different types of parties. We argue

that populist communication can be combined with different ideologies and that therefore politicians across the political spectrum may employ populist communication to a certain extent. However, we expect extreme[8] parties to use more populist key messages than politicians of moderate or center parties (*H3*) due to their frequent role as outsiders, their opposition to mainstream parties, and their emphasis on responsiveness to voters' demands over responsibility (R. S. Katz & Mair, 2009; Mair, 2002). This had previously been shown based on party manifestos (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017) and press releases (Bernhard, 2016).

5.1.1 Research Design

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of politicians' statements in talk shows and on social media ($N = 2454$). We included 74 politicians in four countries (CH, DE, UK, and US) during a three-month nonelection period in 2014. The study followed a three-step sampling procedure that allowed individual matching on the level of the politicians. First, we selected four countries that are broadly similar but differ with regard to their systems of government and electoral systems. Second, we identified two relevant political talk shows per country, recorded four episodes per talk show in March through May 2014, and listed all appearing politicians. Third, we sampled the social media material of the politicians' official Facebook and Twitter accounts for the same time period (March 1st through May 31st 2014). The unit of analysis was a single statement by a politician. For each statement, it was coded whether one of the eleven identified populist key messages was present. For each of the three dimensions of populist communication—people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion—we then calculated maximum indices: At least one item of the respective dimension had to be present for people-centrism, anti-elitism, or exclusion to be considered present. The three dimensions were investigated separately as dependent variables because earlier studies suggested that populist communication, especially on social media, occurs in a fragmented form (Engesser, Ernst et al., 2017). The countries and communication channels were coded as categorical variables. Additionally, the position of the political parties on the left-right spectrum was assessed based on the Chapel Hill expert survey (CHES) (Bakker et al., 2015; Ladner, 2017; Wagschal & König, 2015), and a dummy variable was calculated for parties at the two extremes of the left-right scale. To test the three hypotheses, we conducted analyses of variance (ANOVA) using the three indices for people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion as dependent variables.

[8] In the original article, we speak of "pole parties" but the label "extreme parties" has been found to be the more broadly used term.

5.1.2 Findings

Although we find that the country context seems to influence the extent to which politicians communicate populist ideas, the results do not confirm our expectations formulated in *H1*. People-centrist key messages were used to a similar extent across all four countries. Anti-elitist key messages were communicated quite often by politicians in the three European countries but to a significantly lower extent in the United States. The exclusion of specific social groups was relatively common in Switzerland but practically irrelevant in the other three countries. Thus, following the typology by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), we find a most *complete* populism in Switzerland, a more *anti-elitist* populism in Germany and the United Kingdom, and a mostly *empty* populism in the United States. On the one hand, these findings imply that formal structures of the political system cannot alone explain differences in the levels of populist communication across countries. Additionally, cultural, historical, and more volatile situational context factors need to be considered (see also Reinemann et al., 2017). This interpretation seems all the more relevant if we consider the developments in these countries in the years since the data collection in 2014. With the rise of Donald Trump in the United States, the *AfD* in Germany, and with the conflict around 'Brexit' in the United Kingdom, the extent of populism is likely to have risen and become more complete in the communication of politicians in these countries as well. On the other hand, these findings also suggest that other contextual factors on the meso level, such as the media setting or the ideological positioning of parties, may have a higher explanatory power.

In fact, the study demonstrates that the extent to which politicians use populist key messages is dependent on the communication platform. Confirming *H2*, politicians' communication was more people-centrist, more anti-elitist, and more exclusionist on political talk shows than on social media. Thus, we confirm that the high audience orientation and strong media logic of talk shows provoke populist communication, and we challenge assumptions that social media are inherently a more populist communication channel (Engesser, Ernst et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017). However, because this last finding is in conflict with a study by Ernst, Blassnig et al. (2019), this issue will be further discussed in Chapter 6.1.

Finally, we find that although politicians across the political spectrum use populist key messages from time to time, the extent of the use of the different dimensions depends on the politicians' position on the political spectrum. We partly find support for our assumption in *H3* that politicians of extreme parties communicate in a more populist way than do politicians of moderate or center parties. As expected, politicians on both political extremes communicated more anti-elitist key

messages than moderate or center parties did. However, people-centrist key messages were used to a similar extent across the political spectrum, and exclusionist key messages were employed almost exclusively by right-wing politicians. Referring again to Jagers and Walgrave (2007), we find that an *empty* populism is relatively common across the political spectrum, whereas the left-wing typically employs a more *anti-elitist* populism, and a *full* populism can be mostly found for right-wing politicians, at least in the four countries under investigation.

This study demonstrates that populist communication can be regarded as a transnational phenomenon that is widely—but not uniformly—employed in the self-presentation of politicians across four established democracies, different communication channels, and party affiliations. This finding reinforces the argument made by Cranmer (2011) that populist communication is context-dependent and that political talk shows tend to be specifically populist communication arenas. Thereby, it also challenges the notion that politicians' self-presentation on social media is specifically prone to populism.

5.2 *Article II:* Populism in Online Election Coverage: Analyzing Populist Statements by Politicians, Journalists, and Readers in Three Countries

In *Article II*, we focus on the online media representation of populist communication during election campaigns in three countries (FR, CH, UK). This study is among the first attempts to investigate populism in *online* news and to provide empirical evidence for all three components of populism and the media—populism *by* the media, populism *through* the media, and *populist citizen journalism*—as proposed by Esser et al. (2017). The aim of this article is to investigate how politicians, journalists, and citizens contribute to the expression and dissemination of populist ideas online and to identify drivers of populist communication in online news media. We analyze differences between online news articles and comment sections, political actors and media actors as speakers of populist key messages, and between opinion-oriented stories and straight news items, and we investigate how reporters contextualize the populist messages of political actors.

First, based on the lower journalistic hurdles and the theoretical functions of reader comments elaborated in Chapter 3.3.2, we expect the extent of populist communication to be higher in reader comment sections than in news articles (*H4*). Second, we expect the extent of populist messages to be higher in opinion-oriented stories than in straight news items (*H5*). Opinion-oriented or interpretative journalism is closely related to conflictive aspects such as negativity, distrust of political elites, personalization, or a focus on political strategies, which are all seen as

favorable for populism. Third, as elaborated in Chapter 3.2., media outlets may construct populist messages themselves or provide a stage for populist messages by political actors. We expect that aspects of media logic and commercialization that are heightened in the online environment will specifically foster the proliferation of populist messages by political actors. Therefore, we expect that the extent of populist messages by political actors in online news is greater than the extent of such messages by media actors (*H6*). Finally, we investigate how journalists convey populist messages by politicians. Thus, we ask how the online news media contextualize populist messages by political speakers (*R1*). We investigate whether journalists (a) neutrally disseminate populist messages by politicians, (b) explicitly attenuate, scrutinize, or criticize such messages, or (c) provide a favorable setting for them by explicitly amplifying, supporting, legitimizing them, or by expressing populist messages themselves. As there had not been much empirical research on this, we address this as an open research question.

5.2.1 Research Design

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of online news coverage during national election campaigns in France (2017), Switzerland (2015), and the United Kingdom (2015). We focused on the topic of immigration because this topic has been identified as one of the driving forces of support for populist parties in Western and Northern Europe (Stanyer et al., 2017). Per country, we selected six news outlets: the online outlets of two leading upmarket daily newspapers, the dominant mass-market daily paper, and two TV-parent outlets (one public and one private). Furthermore, we included a pure online outlet in each country. Following a user-based sampling approach, for each outlet, 30 news articles were sampled via Google site search using an immigration search string. This led to 493 news articles, of which 358 received at least one comment. Finally, for these news articles, the chronologically first 10 reader comments were sampled (N = 2904). This led to a final sample of 493 news articles and 358 comment sections, which served as the units of analysis.

Populist communication was measured based on twelve populist key messages that correspond to the four dimensions of people-centrism, anti-elitism, restoring sovereignty, and exclusion (see Table 1 in Chapter 4.3). All twelve items were coded as dummy variables on the story level. As the dependent variable, a populism index was calculated, which was present if at least one of the twelve populist key messages was used in a story or comment. Additionally, we coded for each populist key message whether the speaker was a political actor, a media actor, or a citizen. Finally, if a story included a populist key message by a political

actor, it was coded whether the media story (a) disseminated the message neutrally, (b) explicitly attenuated or criticized the message, or (c) explicitly supported, reinforced, or legitimized it. For the comparison of news articles and comment sections as equal units of analysis, the comments were aggregated on the article level to answer *H4.* To test the three hypotheses, we conducted analyses of variance (ANOVA) using the populism index as the dependent variable.

5.2.2 Findings

Overall, we find the extent of populist communication to be quite high in comparison to previous content analyses (Ernst et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2017b). We argue that on the one hand, this may be interpreted cautiously as evidence of an increasing presence of populism in the last few years and for the favorable environment of online media. On the other hand, these high levels may reflect our "burning glass" perspective: by focusing on countries with relatively successful populist parties, election periods, and the topic of immigration, we investigate populist communication under most-likely conditions.

We find clear evidence that populist communication is more prevalent in comment sections than in news articles and that *H4* can be supported across all three countries. Furthermore, we find that citizens use populist messages in their comments to a similar extent in all three countries, whereas the extent of populism in the news articles is highest in the United Kingdom, followed by France, and lowest in Switzerland. Thus, as one of the first studies to explore this issue, this paper provides empirical evidence for the phenomenon of a *populist citizen journalism* in the form of reader comments (Esser et al., 2017) and shows that comment sections provide a specifically favorable environment for populist communication by citizens. With regard to *H5*, we only find a tendency for opinion-oriented stories to be more populist than straight news stories overall. When we differentiate between the different speakers of populist communication, we see that journalists are more likely to express populist ideas in opinion-oriented formats, whereas populist messages by politicians are more often cited in straight news items. Moreover, we find clear support for the assumption in *H6* that the majority of populist key messages in online news articles originate from politicians, not from journalists. Finally, a descriptive analysis for *R1* shows that if articles contain populist messages by politicians, in most cases, journalists neither explicitly attenuate nor amplify these messages but rather disseminate them neutrally. This article therefore provides empirical evidence for the distinction between populism *by* the media and populism *through* the media in online news articles (Esser et al., 2017) and for the different roles that journalists play in the dissemination of populist ideas. Journalists are

more likely to provide a platform for populist messages by politicians in online news articles than they are to make populist statements themselves. If journalists do express populist ideas themselves, this is mostly limited to opinion-oriented formats, whereas populist statements by politicians are more often cited in straight news articles. Finally, journalists rarely explicitly attenuate or criticize populist statements by political actors, at least in our sample—as this last finding seemingly contradicts results of another recent study by Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al. (2018), as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.1.

5.3 *Article III:* Populism and Social Media Popularity: How Populist Communication Benefits Political Leaders on Facebook and Twitter

The focus of *Article III* lies in the connection between politicians' self-presentation on social media and citizens' reactions in the form of popularity cues. The aim of this study is to investigate whether populism generates a higher social media response for political leaders on social media across six Western democracies (CH, DE, FR, IT, UK, US). We examine differences between platforms—Facebook and Twitter—as well as between leaders who are typically classified as populist in the literature and typically nonpopulist leaders.

Based on a review of recent literature on populist political leaders on social media, we formulate three hypotheses.[9] First, we expect political leaders to receive higher numbers of popularity cues when they communicate populist key messages. We provide three arguments for this: (a) populism's potential for a political mobilization of otherwise inactive groups of citizens (Jansen, 2011); (b) populism's high news value and compatibility with media logic that may translate into a high *shareworthiness* (Trilling et al., 2016); (c) empirical evidence that populist content elements (Bobba, 2018) and communication styles that are often associated with populist communication (e.g., emotionalization, negativity, and personalization) (Bene, 2017a; Heiss et al., 2018; Staender et al., 2019) increase the likelihood that social media posts are liked or shared. We expect a positive effect of populist communication on popularity cues both on the statement level and on an aggregated actor level. On the one hand, we assume that an individual populist post receives more popularity cues than a nonpopulist post (*H7a*). On the other hand, we expect that the more populist key messages political leaders communicate, on average, the more popularity cues they receive (*H7b*). This is based on the assumption that

[9] In the original article, we do not formally label our theoretical assumptions as hypotheses but more generally as expectations. This is due to the purpose of the book chapter, which was intended to be accessible and comprehensible to a broader audience.

because populist communication mostly occurs in a fragmented form on social media (Engesser, Ernst et al., 2017), it may matter more how much populism social media users are confronted with on the average level of the political leader. Second, we expect differences between the two social media platforms under study, Facebook and Twitter. We assume that Facebook has a higher affinity to populist communication than Twitter due to a stronger reciprocity (i.e., a stronger exchange between the sender and the audience), a higher degree of proximity through lower anonymity and stronger personal relationships, and a broader user demographic (see also Ernst, Engesser, Büchel et al. 2019). Ernst et al. (2017) further show empirically that politicians prefer Facebook to Twitter as a platform to communicate populist messages. Therefore, we expect that populist communication has a stronger positive effect on popularity cues on Facebook than on Twitter (*H8*). Third, we contrast political leaders of parties that are typically defined as populist in the literature with typically nonpopulist actors. Generally, populist leaders are expected to communicate in a more populist way on social media (see also Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019). They may also have a higher interest in circumventing traditional gatekeepers and the mass media and may therefore be more inclined to adapt their communication to social media or network logic. Therefore, we expect that tweets and posts of typically populist leaders receive more popularity cues overall (*H9a*). On the other hand, we assume that the followers of such typically populist leaders also have stronger populist attitudes and therefore may be more likely to like or share populist posts or tweets. Hence, we expect that the effect of populist key messages on popularity cues is stronger for populist political leaders than for nonpopulist political leaders (*H9b*).

5.3.1 Research Design

The study is based on a semiautomated content analysis of Facebook posts and tweets by 36 political leaders from six countries (CH, DE, FR, IT, UK, US) during three politically routine months from September to November 2015. For each country, we selected five parties: the four largest parties in parliament across the left-right spectrum and the largest party classified as populist in the scientific literature. We focused on political leaders and selected the politicians with the highest hierarchical position in the party and/or country in 2015. We downloaded all social media posts from the politicians' verified Twitter and Facebook accounts and coded all Facebook posts and tweets in which a politician made an explicit statement on an issue or a target actor. The final analysis comprises 345 Facebook posts and 221 tweets from 36 political leaders.

The unit of analysis was a tweet or Facebook post by a political leader (speaker) that contained a statement on a target actor or an issue. Our dependent variable—popularity cues—was measured as the sum of likes and shares on Facebook and the sum of favorites and retweets on Twitter. Populist communication was operationalized based on nine populist key messages for the three dimensions of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and restoring sovereignty (Wirth et al., 2016). The nine populist key messages were operationalized using a broad set of categories, and for each category, we coded whether it was present in a given social media statement or not. Populist communication was considered present if at least one of the nine populist key messages was present in a statement. Additionally, the populism index was aggregated on the actor level, indicating the share of tweets or posts per actor that contain a populist key message. Based on the existing literature (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; van Kessel, 2015), we calculated a dummy variable for political leaders of parties that are typically classified as populist. Additionally, as control variables, we coded dummy variables for gender (male = 1) and party incumbency. We also controlled for the general profile reach, consisting of the total number of Facebook page likes and the number of Twitter followers per political leader. In addition to these political actor categories, a dummy variable for Facebook was calculated.

Typical for count distributions, the distribution of our dependent variable—popularity cues—is right-skewed and has a standard deviation larger than the mean. To account for this, we conducted negative binomial regressions to answer our hypotheses. This analytical approach is in line with other recent studies using popularity cues as a dependent variable (Bene, 2017a; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Saxton & Waters, 2014; Trilling et al., 2016).

5.3.2 Findings

First, with regard to *H7a* on the effect of populist communication on the statement-level of popularity cues, the findings do not support our assumption. Contrary to our expectation, political leaders did not receive significantly more popularity cues for individual populist social media posts than for nonpopulist posts. However, on the aggregated actor level, we find support for our expectation in *H7b*: The more populist key messages political leaders communicate, on average, on social media, the more user reactions their tweets or Facebook posts receive. Second, we examine the role of the social media platform and find a significant positive interaction between the populism index and Facebook. This means that on Facebook, political leaders receive more popularity cues for populist posts than for nonpopulist posts, providing support for *H8*. On Twitter, on the other hand, communicating populist

key messages seems to have a negative effect on popularity cues. Finally, we compare typically populist leaders with typically nonpopulist leaders. We find clear evidence that leaders of typically populist parties receive overall more popularity cues than leaders of typically nonpopulist parties, providing support for *H9a.* However, contrary to our expectations in *H9b*, populist leaders do not receive more popularity cues in response to populist key messages than nonpopulist leaders. Additionally, based on two qualitative examples, we illustrate that news media may provide politicians with additional reach by republishing their social media posts in online news stories. This indicates that although only a small share of social media posts actually contain populist key messages (Ernst et al., 2017; see also *Article I*), they may receive disproportionate reach and attention, both directly on social media and indirectly through journalistic mass media.

To summarize, as expected, populist posts receive more popularity cues than nonpopulist posts, but we only find this effect for Facebook. On both platforms, posts of political leaders that communicate more populist key messages on average have a higher popularity or reach. Thus, for Twitter, it seems to be more important to followers how political leaders communicate overall or what image they have. If political leaders regularly tweet populist key messages, this may have a spillover effect on their nonpopulist tweets. Finally, political leaders of typically populist parties receive a higher social media response than nonpopulist leaders overall. However, they do not profit more from using populist key messages. Consequently, for both typically populist and nonpopulist political leaders, the use of populist key messages leads to more popularity cues on Facebook. Thus, as one of the first studies, this article provides empirical evidence across six Western countries that both populist communication and populist actors act as drivers of popularity cues on social media.

5.4 *Article IV:* Hitting a Nerve: Populist News Articles Lead to More Frequent and More Populist Reader Comments

Article IV builds conceptually and theoretically on *Articles II* and *III* but focuses more closely on citizens and an effects perspective by analyzing how populist statements by journalists and politicians in online news articles affect the number and content of reader comments by citizens. We begin by integrating theoretical perspectives on populism and the media and on the role of reader comments in the online public sphere. On the one hand, these perspectives explain, from a supply-side perspective, why populist communication may provoke more reader comments as well as why reader comments may be generally prone to populist communication (see Chapter 3.3.2). On the other hand, previous research indicates

that journalistic content has an impact both on how many people comment on online news articles (Tenenboim & Cohen, 2014; Ziegele et al., 2018; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014) and on the content of online discussions (Gervais, 2014; Walter, Brüggemann, & Engesser, 2016; Ziegele et al., 2018). We complement these insights with a demand-side perspective by conceptualizing the presence and content of reader comments as the manifestation of effects of populist communication on citizens and by providing different persuasion processes such as schema theory, priming, and social identity theory as explanations (see Chapter 3.3.3). To summarize, we expect that populist key messages by politicians or journalists in news articles may trigger a populism schema, in-group and out-group identifications, or emotions that may then influence whether and how a recipient comments on an article. Based on these theoretical considerations, we expect that, first, articles that contain populist key messages by political speakers (*H10a*) or media speakers (*H10b*) receive higher numbers of reader comments than nonpopulist articles. Second, we expect that comments are more likely to be populist if they respond to an article containing populist key messages by political speakers (*H11a*) or media speakers (*H11b*). Finally, how journalists transmit and interpret populist key messages may influence how citizens react to such articles in reader comments. We therefore formulate an additional open research question as to whether the contextualization of populist key messages in news articles has an influence on the use of populist communication in reader comments (*R2*).

5.4.1 Research Design

This article is based on the same data collection as *Article II*, i.e., on a quantitative content analysis of news articles and the respective reader comments during election campaigns in France (2017), Switzerland (2015), and the United Kingdom (2015), with a focus on the issue of immigration. In contrast to *Article II*, there are two notable differences with regard to the sample. First, we had to exclude the online outlets of the private TV stations because they did not receive enough reader comments to be incorporated in the analysis. Second, because in this article we focus on the relation between the articles and the corresponding comments, we only included news articles that received at least one comment. This led to a final sample of 332 articles and 2786 reader comments. Based on the same operationalization of populist communication as in *Article II*, we calculated populism indices for the three speaker types—political actor, media actor, and citizens—which were present if the respective speaker type used at least one of the twelve populist key messages in a news story or comment. The contextualization of populist key messages in the news stories was coded the same way as in *Article II* for whether the

media (a) disseminated the message neutrally, (b) explicitly attenuated or criticized the message, or (c) explicitly supported, reinforced, or legitimized it. Additionally, the total number of comments an article received was assessed based on the numbers provided for each news article by the outlet below the article.

To test *H10a* and *H10b*, we used negative binomial regression with the articles as units of analysis and the total number of comments each article received as the dependent variable. As elaborated with regard to *Article III*, this analysis strategy accounts for the right-skewed and overdispersed distribution of the dependent variable. To test *H11a* and *H11b* and answer *R2*, we conducted multilevel regression models to account for the fact that the reader comments as units of analysis on the first level are nested within the articles they respond to on the second level.

5.4.2 Findings

In a first step, we find clear evidence that news articles that contain populist key messages receive higher numbers of reader comments than do nonpopulist articles. Controlling for differences between countries and different news outlets, we find that the presence of populist statements by both political and media speakers in the articles positively and significantly predicts higher numbers of reader comments. The incidence rate ratios of the negative binomial regression suggest that articles in which journalists cite populist key messages by political actors trigger 2.28 times more reader comments, and articles in which journalists themselves make populist statements receive 1.80 times more comments than articles without any populist key messages. This provides clear support for *H10a* and *H10b*: Readers are more likely to comment on an article if it contains populist key messages by politicians or journalists. In a second step, we investigate whether the presence of populist key messages in the news articles also increases the likelihood that the responding reader comments include populist key messages. Again, we find clear empirical support for this assumption. Controlling for differences between different types of outlets and the length of a comment in a multilevel regression model, populist key messages by political speakers and by media speakers significantly predict populist key messages by citizens in reader comments. Thus, supporting *H11a* and *H11b*, citizens are more likely to communicate populist ideas in response to articles that contain populist key messages by politicians or journalists. Finally, to answer *R2*, we added fixed effects to the multilevel regression model for whether journalists explicitly attenuated or amplified populist key messages by politicians in the articles. Both attenuation and amplification do not have a significant effect on populism in the reader comments, whereas the effect of populism

by political speakers remains significant. Thus, the inclusion of populist key messages by politicians in news articles seems to positively affect populism in reader comments regardless of whether these messages are attenuated, amplified, or disseminated neutrally by the media.

The aim of this study was to investigate how populism in the news media affects the behavior of media users, specifically, the number and content of reader comments. Our findings suggest that populism in articles triggers *more frequent* and *more populist* reader comments. Overall, our study contributes to research on populist online communication and its effects by demonstrating that (1) populist key messages resonate with citizens and are disseminated by them; (2) populist key messages multiply and lead to more populist key messages by citizens; and (3) journalistic contextualization does not matter significantly, at least in our case, where populist statements were mostly disseminated neutrally.

5.5 *Article V:* Populist and Popular: An Experiment on the Drivers of User Reactions to Populist Posts on Facebook

Building on the results of the previous articles, *Article V* also focuses on the effect of populist online communication on citizens' reactions but takes a more explicit demand-side perspective by conducting an online survey experiment. This study has two main aims and contributions to the existing literature. First, it investigates how populist messages and populist actors interact in their effect on citizens and how both components foster user reactions. Second, it complements existing content analyses of digital trace data (see *Articles III* and *IV*, Bobba, 2018) by analyzing not only the effect of populist communication in political actors' Facebook posts on user reactions but also how this effect is moderated by recipients' populist attitudes.

In a first step, the study investigates how populist messages and populist actors contribute to the triggering of a populism schema and thus to the perception of a Facebook post as comprising populist ideas. According to schema theory, highlighting one element of a cognitive cluster is often sufficient to coactivate other elements of the cognitive cluster (F. C. Bartlett & Burt, 1933; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Iran-Nejad, 1984). Messages that contain one element of populist communication may also make other elements more salient and activate a populism schema in total (Müller et al., 2017). Based on these considerations, we argue that political actors who are typically associated with populist ideas or known for populist communication may similarly activate a populism schema. Thus, such a typically populist actor as the source of a message may increase the recipient's perception of a

message as being populist. Therefore, we expect that a Facebook post will be perceived as more populist if the sender is a typically populist actor compared to a typically nonpopulist actor, regardless of whether the post contains populist key messages (*H12*).

In a second step, we investigate the effect of populist communication and populist actors on user reactions. Based on the social identity model of collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2008), we again expect that the activation of specific in-group and out-group identities leads to a higher likelihood of citizen engagement and, thus, a higher likelihood that citizens will like, share, or comment on a Facebook post. The empirical evidence of *Article III* further suggests that both populist actors and populist messages are positively associated with higher numbers of user reactions on Facebook. Thus, we expect that recipients are more likely to react to a Facebook post containing populist messages than to a nonpopulist Facebook post (*H13a*) and to a Facebook post by a typically populist politician than by a mainstream politician (*H14a*). However, based on the literature on the effects of populist communication, we expect that prior populist attitudes act as a moderator of the effects of populist communication on the micro level (e.g., Müller et al., 2017). Thus, we assume that these effects will be moderated by recipients' populist attitudes. Hence, we expect that recipients *with higher populist attitudes* are more likely to react to a Facebook post containing populist messages than a nonpopulist Facebook post (*H13b*), and to a Facebook post by a typically populist politician than by a mainstream politician (*H14b*). Additionally, we formulate two open research questions. Because we assume that populist key messages and typically populist politicians activate a similar cognitive schema, we ask whether the content and actor will substitute each other or interact in their effect on user reactions (*R3*). Finally, we ask whether these effects are different for the different types of user reactions: liking, sharing, and commenting (*R4*). Because these different types of user reactions can be distinguished with regard to their level of activation (Berger & Milkman, 2010) and the user motives behind them (Bene, 2017a), they may also differ with regard to the effect of populist communication.

5.5.1 Research Design

We conducted an online survey experiment with a 2x2 design (N = 640) with a sample representative of the Swiss German-speaking population with regard to gender, age, and education. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups: (1) populist message by a typically populist politician, (2) nonpopulist message by a typically populist politician, (3) populist message by a typically nonpopulist politician, or (4) nonpopulist message by a typically

nonpopulist politician. Each subgroup was presented with a Facebook post that was designed for the purpose of this study. The post consisted of a message arguing for stronger control of immigration and a picture of a link to a nonfictitious article by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on the negative long-term consequences of immigration. The claim (for more control on immigration) was constant across all stimuli, whereas the exact wording of the posts was adjusted according to the experimental manipulation. Populist versions of the post included populist key messages approaching the people, blaming the political elite, and demanding the people's sovereignty. As senders of the posts, two members of the Swiss national parliament were chosen that represent a typically right-wing populist party (Roger Köppel, *Swiss People's Party, SVP*) and a typically nonpopulist moderate party (Gerhard Pfister, *Christian People's Party, CVP*). After seeing the post, the participants reported how likely they were to (a) like, (b) share, or (c) comment on the post on a scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (highly likely). For the dependent variable, user reactions, a mean index was calculated based on these three items. Populist attitudes were operationalized based on Schulz, Müller et al. (2018) using twelve items, for which a mean index was calculated. Additionally, as control variables, the participants reported their political orientation and their support of the promoted claim. As treatment checks, the participants' perceptions of populist communication and their recognition of the politician were assessed.

To answer *H12*, we conducted a two-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a mean index for the perception of populism as the dependent variable and the two factors of the experimental setting, populist message and populist actor, as independent variables. To answer the remaining hypotheses and research questions, a moderation model was computed using PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) with a mean index for the user reactions as the dependent variable and controlling for age, sex, political orientation, and support of the promoted claim.

5.5.2 Findings

Our study finds clear support for the assumption that communication by typically populist actors can elicit a populism schema, even if the particular message does not contain populist key messages. Restricting the sample to those participants who correctly identified the party affiliation of the political actor in the post (N = 327)[10], we find that both the populist message and the populist actor have a significant positive effect on the perception of a Facebook post as representing populist

[10] Following schema theory, the manipulation of the source depends on the recognition of the actors; i.e., the manipulation can only be effective if the participants recognize the actors as populist or nonpopulist.

ideology (i.e., people-centrism, anti-elitism, restoring sovereignty). For both politicians, the posts that contain populist messages are perceived as more populist. However, posts that do not contain any populist messages are perceived as significantly more populist when the source is a typically populist politician. This supports *H12*.

Furthermore, we find clear evidence that the effect of populist messages on user reactions is moderated by populist attitudes: Only recipients with strong populist attitudes are more likely to react to the populist message than the nonpopulist message. Hence, whereas we only find a tendency that the populist message generally fosters user reactions (*H13a*), the expectation that we would find this effect, especially for participants with strong populist attitudes (*H13b*), is supported. In contrast, the assumption that user reactions would similarly be increased by a typically populist politician (*H14a*), particularly for participants with strong populist attitudes (*H14b*), is not supported. We also find that people with strong populist attitudes are generally more likely to react to a post, which is in line with findings by Fletcher (2019). Furthermore, we find a negative interaction between the populist actor and populist messages for those participants who recognized the actors (*R3*). These participants are more likely to react to a populist message if the source of the message was a typically nonpopulist actor. Finally, we find different effects for the three different types of user reactions (*R4*). *Liking* does not seem to be influenced by either the populist message or the populist actor but rather driven by the support for the message's main claim. The likelihood for *sharing* follows our expectations most closely: Participants with strong populist attitudes are more likely to *share* the populist message than the nonpopulist message. Finally, the participants are more likely to *comment* on a populist message than a nonpopulist message if it comes from the nonpopulist politician.

We conclude that, first, a populist sender as a source of the message increases the perception of the message as representing populist communication. Second, user reactions on Facebook are driven more by the message than by the actor sending the message. Third, the effect of populist communication on user reactions is moderated by citizens' populist attitudes. Fourth, populist communication by a nonpopulist actor elicits more user reactions, which may be explained by a 'surprising' effect and may be driven by both approval and rejection of the message. Finally, populist communication may have different effects depending on the type of user reaction.

6 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION & OUTLOOK

This dissertation set out to investigate *drivers* of populist online communication in politicians' self-presentation and online news media as well as its *effects* on citizens' reactions. Throughout the five related publications summarized in Chapter 5, these two main overarching objectives have been addressed by providing answers to five related research questions and by providing empirical evidence in support of—or refuting—14 hypotheses. The research questions and the main findings with regard to these hypotheses are summarized in Table 2.

In the following chapters, I will first summarize and connect the main findings and discuss their theoretical implications with regard to the overarching research aims of this dissertation. Second, I will integrate the main insights for the supply and the demand side and provide a heuristic model for research on drivers and effects of populist online communication. Third, I will discuss methodological implications and address limitations. Fourth, I will propose different routes for future research in this field. Finally, I will discuss the societal implications, normative aspects, and consequences of the results for political communication in liberal democracies.

6.1 Key Findings & Theoretical Implications

Extant literature has focused on the supply side (e.g., Ernst, Esser et al., 2019; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Stanley, 2008) or the demand side (e.g., A. Akkerman et al., 2014; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016) to explain the rise of populism. However, most studies have focused on the role of politicians, journalists, or citizens separately. Moreover, although the Internet has long been theoretically assumed to have high compatibility with populism, empirical investigations of populist *online* communication were very rare at the beginning of this dissertation project. By investigating *all three key actor groups and their interactions*, this cumulative dissertation provides important contributions to research on both the supply side and the demand side of populist online communication. In the following, I will summarize the key findings and discuss their theoretical implications with regard to the overarching goals to investigate two major unresolved aspects in this field, the *drivers* of populist online communication and its *effects* on citizens' reactions.

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of **drivers of populist online communication** in two respects: (1) politicians' use of populist communication in their self-presentation and (2) the media representation of populist key messages.

Table 2: Summary of hypotheses and main findings

Factors/Hypotheses	Main Findings	Article
RQ1: How do politicians employ populist communication in their self-presentation?		
Political system (H1)	• Most complete populism in Switzerland, more anti-elitist populism in Germany and the United Kingdom, and mostly empty populism in the United States	I
Communication channel (H2)	• Politicians' self-presentation is more populist in political talk shows than on social media.	I
Party extremism (H3)	• Politicians of extreme parties use more populist key messages than politicians of moderate or center parties.	I
RQ2: How do media actors, political actors, and readers employ populist key messages in online news articles and reader comments?		
News articles vs. comment sections (H4)	• The extent of populist key messages is higher in reader comment sections than in news articles.	II
Opinion-orientation (H5)	• The extent of populist key messages by journalists is higher in opinion-oriented stories, whereas the extent of populist key messages by political actors is higher in straight news.	II
Populism *through* the media vs. *by* the media (H6)	• The extent of populist key messages by political actors is greater than the extent of such messages by media actors.	II
Journalistic contextualization (R1)	• Journalists rarely explicitly attenuate or criticize populist statements by political actors.	II
RQ3: Does populism generate more popularity cues for political leaders on social media?		
Populist communication (H7)	• Populist posts do not generally receive more popularity cues than non-populist posts. • Posts of political leaders who communicate more populist key messages, on average, receive more popularity cues.	III
Social media platform (H8)	• Populist posts receive more popularity cues than non-populist posts on Facebook but not on Twitter.	III
Populist leader (H9)	• Political leaders of typically populist parties receive a higher social media response than typically non-populist leaders overall. • There is no interaction effect between populist party affiliation and populist communication.	III

RQ4: How does populist online news influence the number and the content of reader comments?		
Populist communication (H10)	• Articles that contain populist key messages by political speakers or media speakers receive higher numbers of reader comments.	IV
Populist communication (H11)	• Comments are more likely to be populist if they respond to an article containing populist key messages political speakers or media speakers.	IV
Journalistic contextualization (R2)	• The contextualization of populist key messages in news articles does not seem to have an influence on the use of populist communication in reader comments.	IV
RQ5: How do populist messages, populist actors, and their interaction affect citizens' reactions and how are these effects moderated by citizens' populist attitudes?		
Populist actor (H12)	• A Facebook post is perceived as more populist if the sender is a typically populist actor compared to a typically non-populist actor, even if it does not contain populist key messages.	V
Populist communication (H13a)	• Recipients are in tendency more likely to react to a Facebook post containing populist key messages than a non-populist Facebook post.	V
Populist communication*populist attitudes (H13b)	• Recipients with higher populist attitudes are more likely to react to a Facebook post containing populist key messages.	V
Populist actor (H14a)	• Recipients are not more likely to react to a Facebook post by a typically populist politician than by a mainstream politician.	V
Populist actor*populist attitudes (H14b)	• Recipients with higher populist attitudes are not more likely to react to Facebook posts by a typically populist politician.	V
Populist actor*populist communication (R3)	• There is a tendency for a negative interaction between the populist message and the populist actor in their effect on user reactions.	V
Different types of user reactions (R4)	• The effects of populist message, populist actor, and populist attitudes are slightly different for users' likelihood to like, share, or comment on a post.	V

With regard to **(1) politicians' self-presentation**, this dissertation contributes by showing that the extent of populist communication in politicians' self-presentation is dependent on *(a) characteristics of different communication channels* and, more specifically, that *social media are not inherently more prone to populist communication*. In this respect, this dissertation reinforces the conclusions of earlier studies that politicians adapt their use of populist communication to the communication channel and that political talk shows tend to specifically encourage a populist self-presentation (Bos & Brants, 2014; Cranmer, 2011). This finding confirms theoretical expectations that media logic and a strong audience orientation of a communication channel foster the use of populist communication (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008). In contrast, it challenges theoretical perspectives arguing that social media offer specific opportunity structures for populist communication (see Chapter 3.1). Thus, the findings of this dissertation imply that the phenomenon of populist online communication cannot be reduced to politicians' publication of populist messages on social media. For a more complete understanding of populist online communication, we must consider additional communication channels, actors, and contextual factors.

However, another empirical study conducted by our research team finds the opposite result that politicians' self-presentation is more populist on social media compared to talk shows (Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019). Several aspects could explain these surprisingly contradictory results. First, methodological aspects such as the sampling procedure may play a role. In Ernst, Blassnig et al. (2019), we investigated only those tweets and Facebook posts that expressed either a political position or elaboration on a political issue or an evaluation or attribution of a target actor. In *Article I*, we looked at politicians' social media communication more broadly, taking into account any tweet or post that had a written content of more than 40 characters. These could include nonpolitical posts such as event announcements or personal statements that are very common on social media. It is reasonable to expect that politicians are more prone to use populist key messages in statements that specifically target a political issue or political actor. Going a step further, in Ernst, Esser et al. (2019), we show that politicians are more inclined to communicate populist key messages in connection with specific populism-affine issues such as immigration or corruption. Thus, the use of populist communication on social media depends on specific issues and contexts. Second, in both studies, the communication style and content of the talk shows varied greatly from episode to episode depending on the issue, the actor constellation, and the audience involvement. This limits the generalizability of the findings and indicates that other situational factors also matter for the use of populist communication on talk shows.

Overall, these findings imply that politicians' self-presentation on social media is not inherently more populist but that the use of populist communication most likely depends on other factors, such as the situational or issue context. Accordingly, *Article I* further identifies *(b) characteristics of parties* and *(c) context factors on the country level* as drivers of populist communication in politicians' self-presentation. These aspects will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.2. Finally, the impression that social media are particularly prone to populism could stem from the fact that populist statements by politicians receive disproportionate attention on social media (see *Article III* and *V*) as well as in traditional news media (see *Article II* and Ernst, Esser et al., 2019). This aspect will be discussed in more detail below.

With regard to the **(2) online media representation** of populist communication, this dissertation contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence for the theoretical distinction among populism *by* the media, populism *through* the media, and *populist citizen journalism* (Esser et al., 2017) and how these three forms of populism in the media contribute to the dissemination of populist ideas in *online* news.

First, *(a) journalists mostly act as gatekeepers* for populist messages in online news. As *Article II* finds, the majority of populist key messages in online news can be attributed to statements by politicians that are cited directly or indirectly. Thus, journalists provide a stage for populism by politicians rather than voice populist ideas themselves. Whereas populism *through* the media is quite common, explicit populism *by* the media is relatively rare. This can be related to similar findings with regard to print news. Hameleers et al. (2017a), focusing on populism *by* the media, found that only a relatively small proportion of the news coverage included populist statements initiated by the media. In contrast, Ernst, Esser et al. (2019), focusing on populism *through* the media, found that print news media report extensively on populist statements by politicians. Combining and directly comparing these two perspectives, this dissertation shows that this pattern translates to *online* news coverage.

Four reasons may explain why journalists report so extensively on politicians' populist statements (see also Ernst, Esser et al., 2019) and why this may be amplified for *online* news media. *First*, as outlined in Chapter 3.2, populist statements meet the selection criteria of the media due to their frequent compliance with news values and media logic, especially commercial media logic (see also Mazzoleni, 2008). *Second*, journalists may feel obliged to include populist statements for reasons of balance (Esser et al., 2017)—specifically due to populist politicians' issue ownership on contentious topics. This may particularly apply to the topic of immigration that was in the focus of *Articles II* and IV. *Third*, journalists monitor what

politicians say on other channels and incorporate these messages in their news reporting. This intermedia agenda setting has become increasingly prevalent in the hybrid media system (Rogstad, 2016) and can be expected to be even more pronounced in online articles that allow for the direct embedding of politicians' tweets or Facebook posts. *Fourth*, and closely connected, politicians use social media channels not only to circumvent traditional gatekeepers but also to get their messages into the reporting of news media (Chadwick, 2017), as illustrated by two qualitative examples in *Article III*.

Additionally, Ernst, Esser et al. (2019, p. 183) argue that the news media often include populist messages by politicians in their news articles "to criticize and deconstruct them." This argument can be related to Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al. (2018, p. 491), who find that journalists in print news evaluate populist actors and messages mostly critically and "carry out their gatekeeping function in a rather restrictive way." In contrast, *Article II* finds very few attempts by journalists to explicitly attenuate, criticize, or deconstruct populist statements by politicians. In fact, this dissertation finds that online news media disseminate populist messages mostly neutrally and that journalists' role as *interpreters* is very limited. This finding contradicts Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al. (2018) and is relatively surprising. Stanyer et al. (2019), for example, find that journalists perceive populism mainly as a threat and as harmful for democracy. Additionally, populists often attack the media. Therefore, journalists could be expected to evaluate populist actors and their messages more negatively (Esser et al., 2017; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018).

Five aspects may explain these seeming discrepancies. *First*, a stronger audience orientation and commercialization of online news outlets may foster uncritical reporting on populist actors and messages in exchange for attention and higher click rates (see also Chapter 3.2). *Second*, issue ownership by populist actors or populism-affine issues, such as the topic of immigration in the focus of *Article II*, may drive a more uncritical reporting on populist messages. Although Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al. (2018) conclude that the journalistic gates are relatively closed for populist *actors*, they find that populist *messages* are overrepresented in the coverage of issues that are typically owned by populist parties. *Third*, contextual and situational factors influence how critically journalists cover populist actors and messages. Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al. (2018, p. 489) find news coverage to be especially critical of populist actors and messages "in those systems where mainstream parties have established an effective 'cordon sanitaire' around populist parties." By contrast, *Article II* focuses on three countries (CH, FR, UK) with rather strong populist parties that have been or have become central actors in politics and

media coverage in the last few years.[11] *Fourth*, journalists may report politicians' statements in general relatively uncritically and as unchallenged. This is indicated by the fact that although Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al. (2018) find that populist statements are more often criticized or opposed than nonpopulist statements, this still accounts for a relatively low share (only approximately 3% of anti-elitist and approximately 6% of people-centrist statements were challenged by journalists according to Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018, p. 488). *Finally*, journalists may seldom explicitly criticize populist messages themselves but more often challenge them implicitly by citing critique or opposing views by other sources, using them as "opportune witnesses" (Hagen, 1993). Whereas *Article II* only focuses on explicit contextualization by the journalists themselves, Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al. (2018, p. 485) also consider negative evaluations of the source, disagreement with the source, and contrary positions by another source in the article. To summarize, journalists can be expected to open their gates to populist messages and be less critical towards them in a more commercialized and audience-oriented online environment, in connection with issues that are typically owned by populist parties, and in countries with relatively strong populist parties and no established 'cordon sanitaire'.

This dissertation further finds that *(b) interpretive, opinion-oriented journalism* acts as a driver of populism *by* the media. If journalists make populist statements themselves, which occurs relatively seldom, this is mostly constrained to opinion-oriented stories. This corresponds to similar results with regard to populism *by* the media in print news (Blassnig et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017b). Whereas online news seems to provide incentives for populism *through* the media, populism *by* the media remains a rather 'niche' phenomenon that is heavily dependent on the journalistic reporting style (Hameleers, 2017, p. 194). Thus, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of the role of journalists in populist online communication by demonstrating that journalists mostly act as *gatekeepers* of populist messages by political actors and act less as *interpreters* or *initiators*.

Finally, with regard to drivers of populism in online media representation, this dissertation provides the first empirical evidence for *(c) populist citizen journalism*

[11] CH, where the *SVP* has been the largest party since the late 1990s and is part of the government coalition, arguably does not have a 'cordon sanitaire' (Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017). In the UK, *UKIP* has become a more central actor in British politics and media coverage in the last few years, culminating in the 'Yes' vote on Brexit (e.g, Hughes, 2019; Murphy & Devine, 2018). FR traditionally had a 'cordon sanitaire', specifically around the *Front National (FN)* (Mudde, 2007). However, the *FN* has gotten stronger, reaching a vote share of 33,9% in the second round of voting in the presidential elections 2017. As a result, the media representation of populist actors and messages has likely increased as well (see also Blassnig et al., 2019).

(Esser et al., 2017). More specifically, *Article II* finds that reader comment sections convey more populist messages than the news articles they respond to. This confirms the theoretical expectation that the different functions of reader comments as liberal individualist, communitarian, or counterpublic spaces make them specifically prone to populist communication. It also reinforces Esser et al. (2017)'s expectation that journalistic gates are more open to populist messages in reader comments than in articles. Furthermore, this finding supports the argument that journalists mostly act as gatekeepers for populist messages in online news, not only by politicians but also by citizens. The online environment provides citizens with increasing possibilities to participate actively in the news cycle via reader comments, reader polls, and other social plugins. On the one hand, due to their propensity for populist communication, reader comments may contribute substantially to the extent of populist ideas that readers are confronted with in online news outlets. On the other hand, the extent of populism in reader comments may be reinforced by populist news articles.

This brings us to the **(3) effects of populist online communication** on citizens in the form of audience reactions. In this regard, this dissertation finds that *(a) online populist communication resonates with citizens.* Key findings of *Articles III*, *IV*, and *V* indicate that populist Facebook posts and news articles receive more audience reactions in the form of likes, shares, or comments than does nonpopulist content. From a supply perspective, this confirms the theoretical expectations that populist communication has high mobilization potential (Jansen, 2011), shareworthiness (Trilling et al., 2016), and compatibility with network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). From an effect perspective, this finding can be connected to extant research that argues that populist communication is highly persuasive (Hawkins, 2010; Rooduijn, 2014a; Wirz, 2019), activates a social differentiation between in-groups and out-groups (Hameleers et al., 2017a; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Schulz, Wirth et al., 2018), and has a positive effect on intended political engagement (Hameleers et al., 2018). Extending this research, this dissertation shows that populist communication similarly has a positive effect on citizens' willingness to react to and engage with Facebook posts or online news articles as well as on their actual behavior.

These findings are highly relevant for our understanding of populist online communication: by reacting to populist Facebook posts or news articles, citizens disseminate these messages to a larger secondary audience (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015) and give them a higher reach and a seemingly higher relevance or newsworthiness, implying that populist posts or articles receive disproportionate attention in political online communication. On the one hand, a disproportional popularity

may influence the public perception of social media or online news as being specifically populist communication channels. On the other hand, high numbers of popularity cues on social media may also influence how much presence populist actors or messages are granted in traditional news media. Chadwick (2017), for example, argues that Donald Trump's Twitter use, in combination with the volume of favorites and retweets by his followers, played an important role in his gaining publicity from elite media organizations. Fürst (2018) even suggests that public resonance ("Öffentlichkeitsresonanz") should be considered as a new news value, as journalists increasingly focus on issues that seem sought after and promise a high reach or virality. In this sense, by liking, sharing, or commenting, citizens also act as *gatekeepers* or rather *gatewatchers* (Bruns, 2018) of populist messages at the response level.

Article III finds a similar positive effect on popularity cues by predefined *populist actors*. Thus, typically populist actors receive overall more popularity cues than typically nonpopulist politicians do. *Article V* finds that Facebook posts by a typically populist politician are generally perceived as more populist but finds no main effect of the populist actor on citizens' likelihood of reacting to the message. Thus, the image of politicians as populist and their overall extent of populist communication can have a spillover effect on messages that do not contain any populist elements. This may be particularly true on social media, where political actors send out messages with high frequency. This finding from *Article V* also corresponds to the finding of *Article III* that political actors who communicate more populist key messages on average receive more popularity cues. The contradictory findings with regard to the main effect of populist actors may be partly explained by the specific actors chosen for the experimental study in *Article V* but also by the populations of citizens that were investigated in these two studies. Whereas *Article III* examined manifest reactions of Facebook users who were probably to a large extent "fans" or "followers" of the politicians to whose posts they reacted, *Article V* relied on a representative sample of the general Swiss public. The methodological implications of this difference will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.3. Theoretically, this implies that although typically populist politicians receive more popularity cues by their actual followers, the general population may not be more likely to like or share their posts.

Furthermore, *Article III* finds that both typically populist and nonpopulist politicians received more popularity cues with populist Facebook posts, whereas recipients in the experimental study for *Article V* were even more likely to react to a populist Facebook post if the source was a nonpopulist actor. These findings also suggest that politicians who are typically not regarded as populist can gain higher

resonance by communicating populist messages. This finding could partly be explained by a surprise effect. Furthermore, if a moderate politician communicates populist ideas, this could give recipients who support populist ideas the impression that their views have arrived in mainstream politics. From a supply perspective, this provides an incentive for politicians to use populist communication strategically to receive more user reactions and, thus, a higher reach. However, at least for the intention to comment, a relatively common motive of participants in *Article V* was also to criticize the content of the post. Politicians and news outlets should thus also expect a certain 'backlash' effect if they use populist communication (see also Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). However, in this respect, it can be argued that "there is no such thing as bad publicity" (see also Ernst, Esser et al., 2019, p. 183) because even negative popularity cues imply an indication of relevance (Haim et al., 2018, p. 190). Nevertheless, in this sense, citizens can potentially also act as *critics* or *interpreters* of populist content.

Additionally, this dissertation finds that *(b) populist online communication multiplies*: As *Article IV* demonstrates, populist key messages in online news articles lead to more populist key messages by citizens in reader comments. Hence, reader comments are not only generally more prone to populist communication; populist reader comments can also be interpreted as the manifestation of effects of populist messages in the news articles they respond to. This reinforces the theoretical assumption that populist communication has priming effects (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002) and can activate a populism schema in citizens' memories that is then more likely to be applied in subsequent judgments and evaluations (Krämer, 2014). Existing empirical research indicates that exposure to populist messages can make populist attitudes more salient (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017) or affect citizens' preferences for populist parties by activating populist blame perceptions (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018a). This dissertation extends this research by demonstrating that populist key messages in online news affect citizens' political online expression and increase the likelihood that commenters communicate populist ideas themselves. Furthermore, *Article IV* finds that the contextualization of populist key messages in news articles does not have an influence on the use of populist communication in reader comments. Hence, by including populist key messages in their articles—even if they contextualize or criticize them—online news media can trigger more populist key messages by citizens. This may be especially true for controversial and populism-affine topics such as immigration.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that *(c) citizens' populist attitudes moderate the effects of populist communication on audience reactions*. Only citizens with strong populist attitudes were more likely to react to a populist Facebook post than a nonpopulist Facebook post in the experimental study in *Article V*. This finding

confirms the theoretical argument based on schema theory that populist communication mainly activates preexisting populist attitudes. Earlier research has demonstrated that exposure to populist messages reinforces prior populist attitudes (Müller et al., 2017). This dissertation contributes by showing that populist attitudes also moderate the effects of populist communication on recipients' intended behavior. On the one hand, this finding relativizes the effects of populist communication on citizens' reactions found in *Articles III* and *IV*. It indicates that only citizens who already agree with populist ideas beforehand are more likely to like or share populist messages that they come across online. A similar moderation effect of populist attitudes could be expected for the expression of populist messages in reader comments, although this was not empirically tested in this dissertation. Thus, not everyone will suddenly like and share populist messages or write populist reader comments as a reaction to being exposed to populist messages on social media or in the news. However, as *Article V* further finds, people with strong populist attitudes are generally more inclined to react to social media posts. This corresponds to recent results by the Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2019), which finds that those with strong populist attitudes are heavy Facebook users (see also Schulz, 2018) and more likely to share and comment on news when they use social networks. This could further contribute to the overrepresentation of populist ideas and communication on social media (Fletcher, 2019).

The key findings of this dissertation can be connected and summarized in four main conclusions with regard to populist online communication. First, *politicians' self-presentation on social media is not inherently more populist* compared to other self-presentational communication channels. Although social media provide several opportunity structures for populist communication, politicians' use thereof is influenced by additional factors such as the situational context, the issue, or party characteristics. However, populist social media messages may receive disproportional attention, both directly from followers—specifically on Facebook—and indirectly via traditional mass media. Therefore, politicians may use social media not only to circumvent gatekeepers and directly reach their followers but also to gain attention in the news media. Second, *journalists seldom voice populist ideas themselves, but they readily provide a stage for populist messages* by political actors in online news articles as well as by citizens in reader comments. Thus, journalists mainly act as gatekeepers for the dissemination of populist communication online and less as initiators or interpreters. Third, *populist online communication triggers more audience reactions and the expression of populist messages by citizens*. Thus, within an online context, citizens become a more central actor for the expression and dissemination of populist ideas. Furthermore, similar to journalists, they can assume different

roles as gatekeepers or gatewatchers, initiators, and interpreters of populist messages. Fourth, *citizens' populist attitudes moderate the effects of populist online communication on audience reactions.* Consequently, only a limited, specific group of people spreads populist ideas online. However, this group seems to be especially active on social media and in comment sections and therefore contributes to the impression of an overrepresentation of populist messages.

6.2 Populist Online Communication: An Integrative Model

In this chapter, I attempt to integrate the insights of this dissertation, put them into a larger context, and suggest a heuristic model for future research on populist online communication. In Chapter 3, I set out by conceptualizing populist online communication as the interplay among (1) populist communication in politicians' self-presentation, (2) journalists' media representation of populist actors and populist messages, and (3) citizens' responses in the form of audience reactions. This conceptualization can be related to previous models that describe political communication as a "triangular relationship between political actors, the media and the audience" (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 3; see also, e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Henn, Jandura, & Vowe, 2016). On the horizontal dimension, these models describe the relationship between politicians and the media—the political communication elites—whereas the vertical dimension denotes the interaction between these two actor groups and the citizens, who are seen as "the ultimate addressee" of the political messages (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 3). Traditionally, political communication models were conceptualized as rather top-down, or as Blumler (2016, p. 27) phrased it: "[the] model was essentially pyramidal on a politics to media to audience slope." Thus, these traditional political communication models regarded citizens or audience members simply as receivers of political messages from the political communication elites. However, as many researchers have acknowledged and discussed, relationships between politicians and journalists and between these communication elites and citizens have changed fundamentally in the last few decades. These changes have been attributed to several societal developments, including the digitization of political communication (i.a., Blumler, 2016; Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Pfetsch et al., 2014; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Vowe & Henn, 2016). Amid other consequences, these developments imply a growing interconnectedness between the supply and the demand side of political communication. Furthermore, political actors, media actors, and ordinary citizens reciprocally influence each other in their behavior, leading to a mutual influence of supply and demand factors. Thus, as Van Aelst et al. (2017, pp. 5–6) argue, a comprehensive analysis of any political communication environment should look at both the

supply and the demand side. Henn et al. (2016) further suggest that the levels of effects of political communication are increasingly interconnected and that it is necessary to integrate the macro, meso, and micro levels in explanatory models.

These changes can similarly be applied to populist communication as a specific phenomenon of political communication. As outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, research on populism has long focused on the supply side, specifically on political actors. Only more recently has the role of the media in the dissemination of populist communication been taken into account. Furthermore, for a long time, citizens have been neglected as actors and have only been considered—at most—in their role as passive recipients of populist messages. However, this dissertation shows that the roles of politicians, the media, and citizens have become more interconnected and reciprocal in an online communication environment. Moreover, the boundary between the supply and the demand side has become increasingly blurred (see also Hameleers, 2018). This blurring must be considered when investigating the drivers and effects of populist online communication. Based on these considerations, I propose a heuristic model of populist online communication that integrates the lessons learned in this dissertation and findings from the broader literature.

As Figure 3 depicts, at the heart of this heuristic model lie the three aspects, as similarly proposed in Chapter 3: *(1) politicians' self-presentation*, *(2) journalistic media representation*, and *(3) citizens' (re)actions* that together constitute populist online communication in its manifested form. As the double-headed arrows indicate, the three key aspects are expected to mutually influence each other, which will be discussed in more detail shortly. Additionally, the model includes influencing factors on three levels: (a) structural, situational, and cultural context factors on the *macro level*; (b) characteristics of political organizations, media organizations, and communication channels on the *meso level*; and (c) characteristics of citizens on the *micro level*. In the following, I want to elaborate on these different components and their interactions.

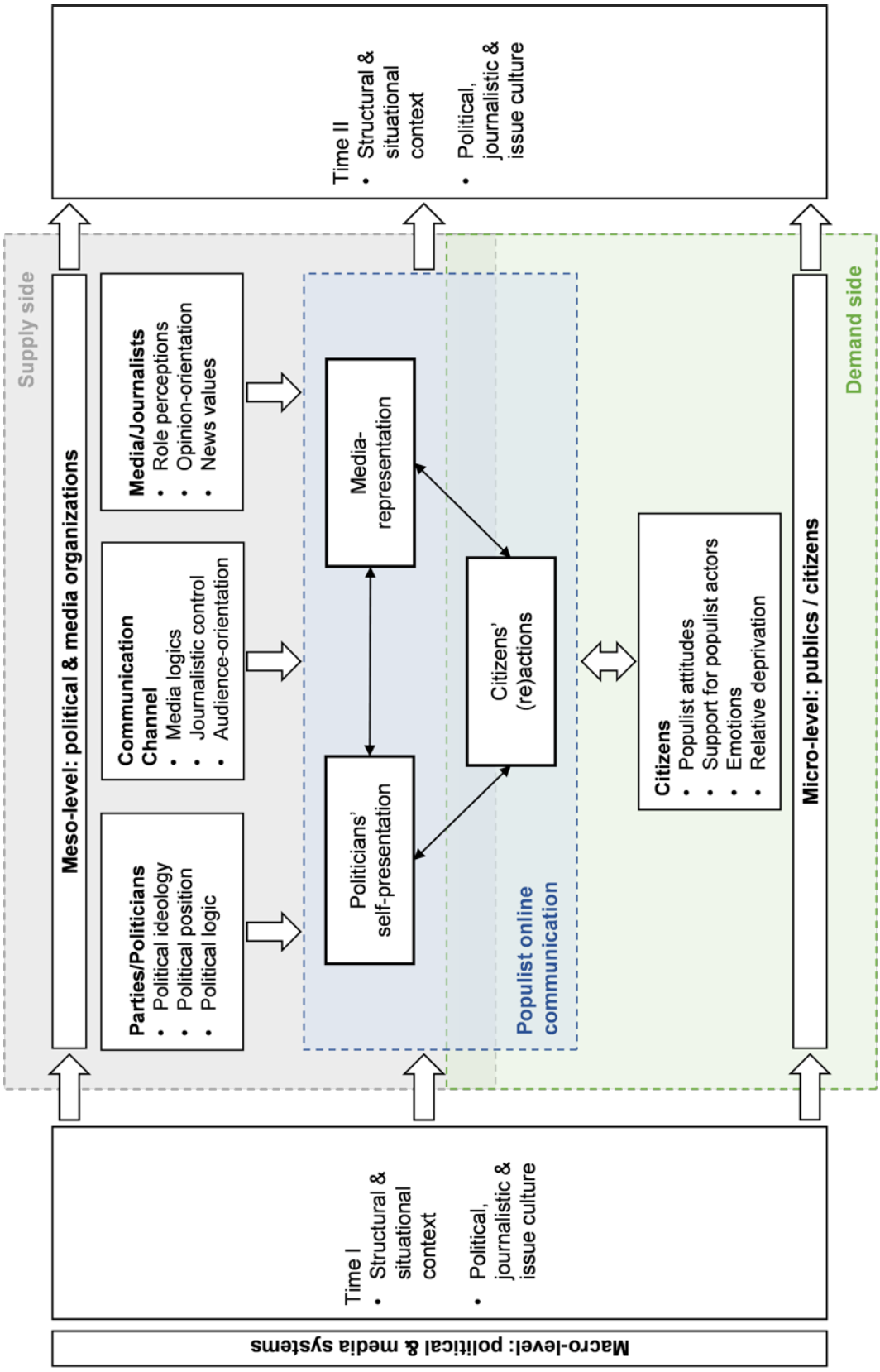

Figure 3: Heuristic model for research on populist online presentation. Source: own presentation.

(1) With regard to *politicians' self-presentation*, on the one hand, how and to what extent politicians communicate populist messages depends on *characteristics of their parties*. First, as discussed theoretically in Chapter 2, populist communication is assumed to be the expression of populist ideology. Thus, as Ernst, Esser et al. (2019) confirm empirically, politicians' self-presentation is more populist if they belong to a typically populist party. The distinction between typically populist and nonpopulist actors has also proven relevant in this dissertation with regard to the effects of populist messages on audience reactions. As this dissertation further demonstrates, parties with an extreme left-wing or right-wing ideology are specifically prone to using populist communication. This finding confirms results from earlier studies (Bernhard, 2016; Ernst et al., 2017; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017) and extends them across two self-presentational communication channels in an international comparison. Other research indicates that the use of populist communication is influenced by the political or strategic position of a party or politician. Specifically, opposition, challenger, and backbencher status have been identified as drivers of populism in politicians' communication (Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019; Ernst, Esser et al., 2019). In addition to ideological reasons, these drivers imply a rather strategic use of populist communication by political actors—depending on their political position, electoral strength, access to the media, or financial resources—to get attention from voters or in the media. This argument had already been implied by earlier studies (e.g., Cranmer, 2011) and has recently been reinforced by Ernst (2019). Generally, populism in politicians' self-presentation can be expected to be influenced by political logic. In particular, politics or market logic may drive the use of populist communication for self-presentational purposes, as these logics are mostly concerned with gaining power, publicity, and votes and are highly audience-oriented and demand-driven (Esser, 2013; Landerer, 2013).

On the other hand, *characteristics of the communication channel* need to be considered. In a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), politicians' self-presentation can include various communication channels: digital and analog, mediated or unmediated, and with varying degrees of journalistic interference. As elaborated theoretically in Chapter 3.1, mass media logic, social or network media logic, and generally a strong audience orientation, provide several opportunity structures for populist communication. Empirically, the fit between populist communication and these logics is not only indicated by the manifestation of populism in politicians' self-presentation on social media but also by the high presence of politicians' populist statements in online news media and the effects of both on audience reactions (Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019; Ernst, Esser et al., 2019). The findings of this dissertation further imply that populism in politicians' self-presentation may be influenced reciprocally by the media representation and citizens' reactions and by

politicians' anticipation of their logics and response. If politicians presume that populist messages might receive more attention in the news media and more popularity cues on social media, this could provide an incentive to use populist communication strategically, as will be discussed more below.

(2) The media representation of populist communication encompasses populism *by* the media and populism *through* the media (Esser et al., 2017), with journalists acting as *gatekeepers, interpreters,* or *originators* of populist messages (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018). How and to what extent the media report on populist messages in their news coverage is influenced by *characteristics of media organizations, journalists*, and the *communication channel*. As discussed in Chapters 3.2 and 6.1, the predominance of populism through the media found in this dissertation can be explained by populism's fit with media logic and news values. For populism by the media, opinion orientation or interpretative journalism was identified as a driver. Thus, populism in online news could be driven or inhibited by specific journalistic role perceptions, as Maurer et al. (2019) demonstrate with regard to print news. Populism by the media could be fostered by an adversarial or interventionist journalistic role perception or culture, whereas populism through the media could be promoted by a strong market orientation (Maurer et al., 2019) or an emphasis on objective balance and fair access (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz et al., 2018). Additionally, populism in politicians' self-presentation is expected to drive populism through the media, as journalists closely monitor politicians' social media communication and increasingly incorporate social media statements as quotes in articles.

(3) Citizens' (re)actions, finally, comprise reactions by citizens to populist messages by politicians or journalists as well as populist messages by citizens themselves. On the one hand, this dissertation argues that audience *reactions* are driven by populism in politicians' self-presentation and by populism in the media representation. As the findings demonstrate, populist messages by politicians and the media increase audience reactions and trigger populist messages by citizens. Thus, when considering citizens' role as *recipients*, audience reactions can be interpreted as effects of populist communication. As this dissertation further shows, these effects are moderated by citizens' populist attitudes. Other research indicates that additional *attributes of citizens,* such as their identification with the source of the message (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017), emotions (Wirz, 2018b), or their feeling of relative deprivation (Hameleers et al., 2018b), can act as moderators of the effects of populist communication. These observations may also apply with regard to effects of populist online communication on audience reactions. Furthermore, populist online communication could have additional direct effects on citizens' attitudes and behavior. On the other hand, I argue that citizens can exert a more *active*

role within an online environment as *gatewatchers* (Bruns, 2019), *interpreters*, or *originators* of populist messages. Whereas in this dissertation, the citizens' role as originators of populist messages is empirically only investigated with regard to reader comments on online news platforms, citizens can also communicate populist messages via other communication channels such as blogs or social media (Hameleers, 2018). This has two implications for the relationship between the demand and the supply side of populist communication.

First, the distinction between the two is becoming increasingly blurry and overlapping, as citizens can be both recipients and senders of populist messages. This overlap can be related to Hameleers' (2018, p. 2182) concept of *populist mass self-communication*, in which citizens become simultaneous consumers and producers of populist messages. The description of citizens as *gatewatchers* (Bruns, 2018) of populist messages further implies a two-step flow of communication (E. Katz, 1957): By liking, sharing, or commenting on populist messages, presumably highly interested and active news and social media users further disseminate these messages to a larger secondary audience (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Thus, audience reactions to populism and populist messages by citizens can be expected to have effects on other citizens' perceptions of public opinion, attitudes, and behavior. This has been shown, for example, by research on reader comments with regard to other topics (e.g., Lee, 2013; Lee & Jang, 2010; Zerback & Fawzi, 2016).

Second, citizens' role in populist online communication can be connected to a general "shift from a supply to a demand market in communication" (Brants & van Praag, 2015, p. 395). Brants and van Praag (2015) argue that wider and more open access to the public sphere has turned citizens into more powerful actors and given the *vox populi* a more central place in political communication. Similarly, Blumler (2016, p. 27) argues that "individuals have become a communicating force" with the arrival of the Internet. The (implicit) power of the public is reflected in the fact that the media and politicians increasingly anticipate what they assume to be the people's needs, requests, frustrations, and resentments and adapt their behavior or communication accordingly (Brants & van Praag, 2015, p. 404). Brants and van Praag (2015) refer to this as "a logic of the public" that complements media logics. Applied to the suggested model for populist online communication, this implies that populism in politicians' self-presentation and in the media is driven reciprocally by the anticipation of citizens' demands and reactions. The prospect of receiving more audience reactions and, thus, more clicks and possibly a higher reach may well provide an incentive to disseminate populist messages. With regard to the news media, Bruns (2018, p. 230) even speaks of a "populism of metrics." Although, Bruns (2018, p. 231) refers to *popular* rather than populist content, if journalists increasingly conflate relevance with popularity—i.e., most read, most

watched, most commented—this could also foster populist messages in the media. Consequently, the effects of populist online communication could simultaneously act as its drivers. These hypothetical feedback mechanisms are, however, only speculation so far and cannot be answered empirically within this dissertation.

What has not been discussed yet are influential factors on the *macro level*. In this regard, this dissertation indicates that in addition to the *structural context of the political and media system*, more volatile *situational and issue context factors* may be relevant as (short-term) drivers of political online communication. On the supply side, this may include the role and strength of populist parties, political crises, and other real-world conditions such as the level of unemployment or the level of immigration (see, e.g., Esser et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2017). Other important factors could be the political and journalistic culture of a country (see, e.g., Maurer et al., 2019). On the demand side, citizens' aggregated perceptions of issues, concerns, or anxieties—as, for example, voiced in polls—could also affect politicians' self-presentation and media representation from an audience-driven perspective (see, e.g., Esser et al., 2019). Finally, the model in Figure 3 takes into consideration that populism may not only have effects on individuals on the micro level but may also lead to changes on the macro level over time. This longitudinal perspective was not incorporated empirically in this dissertation but will be touched upon from a theoretical and normative perspective in Chapter 6.5.

Overall, the model suggests that populist online communication is the outcome of the reciprocal interactions among politicians, journalists, and citizens, in which different logics interact, merge, and collide, and that is driven or inhibited by various factors on the macro, meso, and micro levels. In this sense, many of the findings can be applied to political online communication in general. However, this dissertation looked only at a small selection of factors on these different levels of influence. Therefore, I see the proposed model not as exhaustive but more as a guiding concept for future research, which will be discussed in Chapter 6.4. Additional limitations as well as methodological contributions will be addressed in the next chapter.

6.3 Methodological Implications & Limitations

In addition to the discussed empirical and theoretical implications, I want to highlight *four methodological contributions* of this dissertation and address certain limitations. First, the findings of this dissertation emphasize the significance of *incorporating politicians, journalists, and citizens as actor groups within the same research design* and of *investigating their interactions*. While these three groups have previously

been identified as key actor groups of populist communication (see, e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Reinemann, Stanyer, Aalberg, Esser, & de Vreese, 2019), they have so far mostly been investigated separately. However, the interactions among these different actor groups have become more direct and immediate in the digital age and can take place within the same media platform, as *Articles II* and *IV* show. Furthermore, investigating these actors and their interactions jointly allows for the connection and integration of theoretical and empirical insights of the supply side and the demand side. This approach is particularly important if we want to understand populist online communication and also highly relevant with regard to political communication in general.

Second, this dissertation strengthens the argument of earlier work (Bos & Brants, 2014; Cranmer, 2011; Ernst, 2019; Ernst, Esser et al., 2019) that it is important to *compare the use and extent of populist communication across different communication channels*. With talk shows, online news media outlets, and two social media platforms, this dissertation encompasses online and offline self-presentational channels, social networking sites and traditional mass media, upmarket, mass-market, and pure online outlets. By investigating the drivers and effects of populist communication across these different types of platforms, I demonstrate that their roles in populist online communication differ but also interact and complement each other in a hybrid media system. The findings further indicate that a similar positive effect of populist communication on the number of audience reactions can be found for both social media and online news media, increasing the validity and relevance of this finding. Comparing politicians' communication and its effects across different communication channels is not just significant with regard to research on populism. Studies of other current phenomena of political online communication should also consider the role and interaction of different media platforms in their research designs (see also Bode & Vraga, 2017).

Third, this dissertation contributes to an *internationally comparative perspective* on populist communication. Following a comparative approach allows this dissertation, on the one hand, to identify how contextual factors influence the extent and the manifestation of populist communication in politicians' self-presentation and online news coverage. On the other hand, the comparative design allows us to investigate the effects of populist online communication on audience reactions in varying contexts and provides a higher validity and generalizability of the findings within Western democracies (see also Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). This is especially relevant with regard to a transnational political phenomenon such as populism.

Finally, and most substantially, this dissertation *integrates different methodological approaches* by combining quantitative content analysis, digital trace data, and

an online survey experiment. This multimethod approach complements the advantages and disadvantages of the different methods to produce findings with higher validity. Although automated content analysis is on the rise, previous approaches have had difficulties in adequately grasping the complex and multidimensional concept of populism (Hawkins & Silva, 2018). Therefore, manual content analysis is still the most common method of analyzing populism on the supply side. To investigate the effects of populist communication, research has mostly relied on experimental settings, whereas empirical studies under real-life conditions are scarce (rare exceptions: Bos et al., 2013; Müller et al., 2017; Wirz et al., 2018). Moreover, most experiments have measured only planned behavior (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018). Planned behavior is often merely a vague approximation of actual behavior because it may be influenced by social desirability, past behavior, and anticipated emotions (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). A central contribution of this dissertation is therefore that I investigate the effects of populist online communication based on actual behavior manifested in digital trace data. This approach has the advantage of higher external validity (Howison, Wiggins, & Crowston, 2011) and allows the capture of citizens who actually like, share, comment on, or communicate populist messages under real-life conditions. This is specifically relevant with regard to populist communication. On the one hand, citizens may be more hesitant to express populist messages in an artificial experimental situation due to social desirability. On the other hand, research suggests that generally only a small proportion of the public actually shares or comments on news or political content online (Newman et al., 2016). These active and highly motivated users are hard to identify and recruit for experimental studies. In representative surveys, they usually account for only a very small share of respondents. Digital trace data offer an easy means to investigate these users and their visible behavior under real-life conditions. However, digital trace data usually provide only very limited information on these people's sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes, or motives, thus limiting the generalizability of the found effects and the conclusions about the underlying persuasion processes. Fortunately, this is the advantage of survey experiments: they allow for the measurement of citizens' populist attitudes and various control variables. *Article V* demonstrates that this is highly relevant with regard to populist communication but, in exchange, reaffirms that only a small share of respondents in a representative sample react to populist messages in an artificial setting. Consequently, there is a trade-off between the different methods. This dissertation shows that both approaches—content analysis in combination with digital trace data and online survey experiments—can corroborate and supplement each other and shed light on different effects of populist online communication.

Although this dissertation contributes to the field of populist communication research in several theoretical and methodological aspects, it also has its limitations. An in-depth discussion of the methodological limitations of the individual studies can be found in the respective contributions and shall not be repeated here in detail. Instead, in the following, I want to address certain limitations that go beyond the individual contributions or relate to their connection.

Although this dissertation pursues a comparative approach across different countries, communication channels, and actor types, the scope of the individual studies and the generalizability of their findings remain limited. The country selection focuses solely on Western liberal democracies, in which foremost right-wing populist actors have played a role in recent years. Therefore, additional empirical research is needed to determine whether similar drivers and effects of populist online communication can be identified for other geographical and cultural regions, specifically in a non-Western context and in countries with strong left-wing populist parties. The generalizability is also restricted with regard to the communication channels under study, particularly in light of the rapidly changing online communication sphere.

Because the five articles are based on four empirical studies with different country and actor samples, their findings can only be compared and connected with caution. Most notably, whereas *Articles I* and *III* look at larger country samples, nonelection periods, and a broad range of topics, *Articles II*, *IV* and to some extent also *Article V* apply a "burning glass" perspective. By focusing on countries with strong populist parties (*II* & *IV*), election campaigns (*II* & *IV*), and the topic of immigration (*II*, *IV*, & *V*), they investigate populist communication under most-likely conditions. This approach seemed appropriate because other research has demonstrated that "the combination of certain niche aspects is particularly likely to allow populist communication to display its full potential" (Ernst, 2019, pp. 49–50). However, it must be kept in mind that the polarized context of elections and the controversial, populism-affine topic of immigration likely fuel populist communication and audience reactions. Moreover, the topic of immigration again can be mostly linked to right-wing populism. Ideally, the results should be replicated in nonelection contexts and with regard to topics that are more associated with left-wing politics or are less controversial overall. In that sense, however, the individual articles, specifically *Articles III*, *IV*, and *V*, already complement each other quite well.

Another critical aspect is the definition and operationalization of populist communication. As discussed in Chapter 2.1, this dissertation maintains an ambivalent position with regard to the exclusion of specific social groups as a dimension of populist ideology: In *Articles I*, *II*, and *IV*, exclusion is included as a core

dimension of populist communication, whereas in *Articles III* and *V*, it is not. This difference again limits the comparability of the results. However, I do not regard exclusion as a necessary element of populist ideology in any of the contributions. *Article I* investigates the different dimensions of populism separately, and in *Articles II* and *IV*, the levels of exclusion are relatively low, so that the results would be very similar if this dimension were omitted. Nevertheless, although I consider a broad range of social groups as possible out-groups, mostly right-wing politicians communicate this dimension (see *Article I*). In combination with the country selection and the focus on immigration, this contributes to the fact that the findings of this dissertation can be mostly applied to right-wing populism. In addition, my operationalization shares a more general difficulty with a large body of research on populist communication: Although I theoretically define populist communication as a combination of three or four dimensions, empirically the occurrence of one dimension suffices in order for a statement to be considered populist. This may lead to an overestimation of the occurrence of populism overall. However, it is justified by the fact that populist communication occurs mostly in a fragmented form and that recipients are confronted with the whole picture of populist ideology only on an aggregated level (see also Engesser, Ernst et al., 2017). Moreover, this dissertation focuses exclusively on the content—populist key messages—of populist communication and disregards additional elements such as specific populism-related communication styles. As my colleagues and I argue elsewhere, populist communication can also be regarded as a combination or even cooccurrence of specific key messages and styles (Ernst, Blassnig et al., 2019; Ernst, Esser et al., 2019). Because the populism-related style elements are even more closely related to (network) media logic, they should be incorporated in future studies on populist communication's effects on audience reactions. Nevertheless, I believe that populist key messages, which are directly derived from populist ideology, lie at the core of populist communication and therefore warrant a separate investigation.

With regard to the effects of populist communication on audience reactions, I only consider active reader behavior that manifests in popularity cues or reader comments, i.e., in digital trace data or user-generated content, and I disregard more passive behavior such as reading articles, Facebook posts, tweets, or reader comments (Netzer, Tenenboim-Weinblatt, & Shifman, 2014). Different effects may be found for these allegedly passive behaviors. There are also some general problems with investigating popularity cues and reader comments. Likes, shares, and even comments do not necessarily imply that the readers have actually read a post or an article. Additionally, both popularity cues and reader comments involve a certain 'black box', for which researchers lack information: For popularity cues, this involves the role of algorithms on the different social media platforms; for reader

comments, this concerns the role of journalistic moderation of the comment sections (see *Article IV* in the Appendix for a more detailed discussion of the latter).

Finally, there are some conceptual limitations. I do not empirically investigate whether user comments in response to politicians' populist posts on social media are particularly populist. Nor do I analyze whether citizens' populist attitudes moderate the likelihood that they express populist ideas in reader comments. However, theoretically, these effects can be expected to be similar for both types of communication platforms. This dissertation only looks at a small selection of influencing factors on the macro, meso, and micro levels. Chapter 6.2 discusses some additional factors on these levels that were addressed in other studies. Moreover, the self-presentation of politicians on social media and their media representation are not studied jointly within the same empirical framework. Thus, this dissertation cannot answer to what extent journalists or media organizations incorporate populist (or nonpopulist) statements that politicians make on social media in the news. Finally, with regard to the connection of the supply side and the demand side, I do not investigate the extent to which the effects of populist communication are anticipated by politicians or journalists. Thus, I cannot assess whether politicians or journalists adapt their communication to maximize audience reactions or use populist communication strategically. Despite these limitations, this dissertation provides valuable insights into the drivers and effects of populist online communication, allows for a conceptual integration of these different aspects as proposed in Chapter 6.2, and provides fertile ground for future research.

6.4 Future Research

"Populism is sexy", as Rooduijn (2019, p. 362) opened a recent article on the state of the field. The increasing appeal of populism is reflected in a fast-growing public and academic interest (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1686). As populist ideas are thriving on the supply side and the demand side around the world, research on populism will remain important in political and communication science in the future (see also de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 433). Focusing on the subfield of populist online communication and based on the heuristic model proposed in Chapter 6.2, I suggest five broad directions for future research.

First, future research should delve into the assumed reciprocity among politicians, journalists, and citizens. Do politicians actually use populist communication on social media to gain media attention? In turn, are online media more inclined to incorporate populist social media posts than nonpopulist posts by politicians in the news? What role do popularity cues play in this regard, do they truly function

as indicators of newsworthiness as Fürst and Oehmer (2018) suggest? These questions could be investigated by combining content analyses across different media platforms with contextual data, as in recent analyses on how Donald Trump's communication on Twitter drove news coverage in the 2016 presidential campaign (Wells et al., 2016). In a similar vein, Seethaler and Melischek (2019) investigate how Twitter was used for agenda building in the 2017 Austrian national election campaign. A related open question is whether politicians and the media anticipate the effects of populist communication on citizens and their reactions and adapt their behavior accordingly. This question is more challenging to investigate empirically and would require either a longitudinal research design to evaluate changes in media coverage over time or in-depth interviews with politicians and journalists to assess their motives and judgments (see, e.g., Salgado et al., 2019; Stanyer et al., 2019 for a qualitative approach to investigating politicians' and journalists' views on populism). Especially in comparative research, combined analyses of the interplay between politicians' communication, news coverage, and effects on citizens are still rare and methodologically challenging. Such questions are, however, relevant not only to future research on populist online communication but also to political communication in hybrid media systems in general (see, e.g., Esser, 2019 with regard to election campaign communication).

Second, future studies on populist online communication should build on existing research and investigate additional factors on the macro, meso, and micro levels as well as connect the different levels within the same research design. With regard to the macro level, future research should aim at broadening the scope by going beyond the context of Western democracies. Most research focuses either on a European, Northern American, or Latin American context, but comparative empirical studies across these different geographical areas are rare (for an exception, see, e.g., Zulianello et al., 2018). Even rarer is research on populism in African or Asian countries. Moreover, future comparative work should go beyond descriptive analyses and follow a more explanatory approach (Esser, 2019) to determine which factors on the country level—structural, situational, or cultural (or a combination thereof)—best explain differences in the use of populist communication or in the relationships between the three actor groups. On the meso level, future research on populist online communication should aim at multichannel comparisons (see also Ernst, 2019, p. 56) and consider social media beyond the 'usual suspects' Facebook and Twitter. Although Facebook is still the most important social network for news and is preferred by people with strong populist attitudes, other platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram are gaining importance as gateways to news (Newman et al., 2019). Moreover, the role of YouTube and generally of

audiovisual content remains underexplored. Creating alternative television programs has been an integral part of the communication strategy of, for example, populist actors such as *Podemos* (Casero-Ripolles, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2016) or former *SVP* leader Christoph Blocher ("Teleblocher"[12]). Recent research further provides evidence that the consumption of "alternative media" is related to strong populist attitudes (Müller & Schulz, 2019). Thus, future studies should consider the role of alternative and niche media and their interplay with social and mass media for the dissemination and reinforcement of populist ideas. With regard to the characteristics of parties and politicians, the combination of populism with add-on ideologies such as nationalism, nativism, Euroscepticism, and socialism should be further explored (see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1670). A rigorous comparison of right-wing and left-wing populism would allow us to discern whether the same drivers and effects can be found for both. On the micro level, future studies should conceptualize effects on citizens' behavior more broadly and incorporate passive behavior such as browsing websites or reading articles and posts (Netzer et al., 2014). Recent research has demonstrated that populist attitudes influence the media and news use of citizens (Fletcher, 2019; Schulz, 2018). Future research should therefore explore the relationship among populist online communication, populist attitudes, and citizens' political information behavior in greater depth. In this way, the link between the supply and the demand side could be further explored. Another promising avenue worth exploring is the idea of a two-step flow of populist online communication. Do popularity cues, for example, increase exposure to populist communication or moderate its effects? Generally, research on popularity cues indicates that they can have effects on news exposure, the perception of public opinion, and even attitudes (see Porten-Cheé et al., 2018 for an overview). Specifically, differences between affirmative and critical audience reactions to populist communication could be further explored. An additional question in this regard is whether citizens react similarly to populist messages from other citizens than from politicians or journalists. An experimental study by Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) indicates that populist messages by citizens have similar effects to those of politicians if citizens identify with or support the sender of the message. Under real-life conditions, the perceived similarity with the source of a message could even render populist social media messages by citizens more effective than messages by politicians.

[12] "Teleblocher" is a weekly broadcast in cooperation with Schaffhauser Television, in which the former *SVP* leader and federal councilor Christoph Blocher talks with a journalist who is also the author of a book about Christoph Blocher (see https://www.teleblocher.ch).

Third, we need more comparisons over time to understand the long-term effects of populist online communication. On the macro level, longitudinal designs could investigate the causal relationship between the presence of populist messages in politicians' self-presentation, news coverage, and support for populist ideas and parties in public opinion (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2019) and identify patterns of agenda-setting and agenda-building (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2017) with regard to populism-affine issues. On the meso level, the findings of this dissertation lead to the question of whether mainstream political actors change or adapt their communication as a response to a rise in populism. Similarly, we need to ask whether news coverage of populist actors or media populism is increasing or changing. So far, research has found evidence that both supports (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2019; Rooduijn, 2014a) and negates (Manucci & Weber, 2017) the increasing presence of populism in print news media. Future longitudinal research should investigate populism in the media in a more nuanced way and analyze whether the contextualization of populist messages by the media changes over time or differs between traditional print and digital native outlets. On the micro level, panel surveys could detect long-term effects of populist online communication on citizens' populist attitudes, support for populist actors, and perceptions of public opinion.

Fourth, now that research on populism has already provided a wealth of knowledge, we should leave our "comfort zone" and link studies on populism with other fields of study (see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Within political communication, several other highly topical fields of research, such as disinformation, polarization, or selective exposure, exhibit connections to populism that merit further exploration. A connection between populism and online disinformation and misinformation has already been established theoretically (e.g., Waisbord, 2018a) but requires more empirical investigation. Continuous exposure to populist communication could contribute to an increasing polarization of society (see also Müller et al., 2017). Previous research further indicates a relation between populist communication and selective exposure (Hameleers et al., 2018b). Both aspects may be exacerbated in an online context due to increasingly fragmented audiences[13] (Sunstein, 2002; Van Aelst et al., 2017) and opportunity structures for selective exposure (Dvir-Gvirsman, Tsfati, & Menchen-Trevino, 2016; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005). Such integrative approaches could enable a better distinction and connection of these phenomena and provide a more comprehensive understanding of current political and societal developments.

[13] However, several empirical studies challenge the argument that online media lead to increasing audience fragmentation (e.g., Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012).

Finally, future research on populist online communication faces several methodological challenges. As discussed in Chapter 6.3, the combination of different methodological approaches is essential to grasp a full picture of populist online communication. Therefore, I want to call on future research to follow a multimethod approach that combines content analysis with surveys or experiments (e.g., Müller et al., 2017). In addition, computational methods such as automated content analysis and tracking of political information behavior will become more central. However, the possibility of analyzing more and more detailed content and behavioral data should not come at the expense of a thorough theoretical grounding. Another challenge is that online data are becoming increasingly difficult to access. On the one hand, social media platforms such as Facebook are closing off their APIs (Bruns, 2019). On the other hand, increasingly popular private messaging services such as WhatsApp do not allow researchers to access user data—or only allow restricted access in cooperation with the tech companies—for obvious privacy reasons. For these and other reasons, researchers should therefore combine quantitative methods with qualitative approaches, for example, with qualitative interviews with politicians or journalists (Salgado et al., 2019; Stanyer et al., 2019) or focus groups with citizens.

To summarize, this dissertation provides several starting points for prospective studies. For a comprehensive understanding, future research on populist online communication should strive to be comparative across different countries, time points, communication channels, and actor groups; it should integrate the supply and the demand sides; it should incorporate the macro, meso, and micro levels; and it should go beyond populism by connecting it to other fields of research. That is, there is still a great deal to explore.

6.5 Populist Online Communication & Democracy

The ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy is notorious. On the one hand, populism is often described as a threat to democracy (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 407; Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 2; Taggart, 2002), specifically liberal democracy, because it rejects minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of powers (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1670). On the other hand, populism can also be regarded as a corrective (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012) or, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018, p. 1670) phrase it, "an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism." Hence, populism can also be the expression of legitimate criticism and emphasizes the fundamental democratic concern that the people should exert some control over the government (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1670; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Nevertheless, the homogenous conception of the

people and the demand for an unrestricted implementation of its will are highly problematic and may negatively impact political communication (Waisbord, 2018b). In this light, this final chapter will discuss the findings of this dissertation from a societal perspective and outline practical implications for politicians, the media, and citizens in liberal democracies.

One of the aims of this dissertation was to identify possible drivers of populism in political online communication. With regard to politicians, this dissertation argues that in addition to ideological reasons, mass media logic, network media logic, and a strong orientation towards the public can drive the use of populist communication. So far, mostly outsiders—such as extreme, opposition, or challenger parties—make use of populist communication in their self-presentation. However, the findings also show that populist messages of typically nonpopulist actors receive more popularity cues on social media and that, overall, populist statements are often cited uncritically in the media. Thus, from the point of view of mainstream politicians, it could make sense to "jump on the bandwagon of success" (Ernst, 2019, p. 53) and strategically adopt populist communication or focus on populism-affine issues. In fact, one of the biggest impacts of populist parties may be to influence the policy positions of mainstream parties—specifically with regard to the topic of immigration (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018). However, mainstream politicians may also face a backlash from voters—specifically from those with low populist attitudes—if they suddenly imitate populist actors. Thus, mainstream politicians should be aware that adopting populist communication could have unforeseen consequences (see also de Vreese, Reinemann, Stanyer, Esser, & Aalberg, 2019).

In terms of the media, this dissertation has demonstrated that most populism in online news stems either from cited statements by politicians that are often disseminated uncritically or from opinion-oriented formats. Therefore, as de Vreese et al. (2019, p. 243) urge, journalists and media organizations must "reflect on their values and their role in democracy." They need to be aware of their roles as originators of populist ideas but also as gatekeepers and interpreters of populist messages by politicians and citizens. Journalists should critically reflect and contextualize populist messages, correct wrong statements, and call out violations of democratic norms (see also de Vreese et al., 2019). As research has shown, it is above all undisputed populist statements or a populist bias in news reports that lead to a polarization of populist attitudes (Müller et al., 2017). Consequently, balanced or critical reporting could contribute to counteracting this tendency (see also Wirz, 2019). Furthermore, this dissertation has shown that the media are particularly lenient towards populism in reader comment sections. Although populist reader comments are not necessarily uncivil or nondeliberative, anti-elitist or exclusionist

comments can contribute to a deconstructive, adversarial, or even hateful atmosphere in comment sections. As research on incivility demonstrates (Ziegele & Jost, 2017), an interactive moderation of comment sections and factual responses by journalists can improve the discussion atmosphere without overly restricting free speech. This approach may also be applicable to populist messages in reader comments and attenuate the effects of populist communication. Such a balance between valuing free speech and critically challenging false or problematic statements may be specifically important with regard to populist commenters, as they often hold strong anti-media sentiments or do not feel represented by mainstream news coverage (Schulz, Wirth et al., 2018). Finally, journalists should not mistake popularity for relevance (Bruns, 2018, pp. 230–231). As Loosen and Schmidt (2017, p. 363) argue, "one major challenge for journalists is to reconcile the (assumed) demands of the dispersed and heterogenous, yet often silent, mass media audience with the (verbalized) demands of the connected audiences they face in comment sections and social media." This challenge can be specifically seen with regard to populist online communication, as the following point also illustrates.

Another central finding of this dissertation is that populism in social media posts or news articles leads to more frequent and more populist reactions by citizens. Considering populism's problematic stance on central ideas of liberal democracy, this multiplication and propagation of populist ideas to a larger audience through citizens is highly problematic. In contrast, from the viewpoint of participatory democracy, it can also be interpreted as positive if populist communication contributes to the increased participation of citizens and possibly opinion diversity in the online public sphere, especially against the background that traditional political participation, such as voting in elections, as well as membership and engagement in political parties or trade unions, has declined dramatically (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 8). Moreover, citizens' use of political news is declining (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Thus, if populism did indeed contribute to the political engagement and mobilization of otherwise inactive groups of citizens (Jansen, 2011), this could be seen as desirable. In fact, a recent study found that citizens with strong populist attitudes are more likely to partake in expressive noninstitutionalized modes of participation such as signing petitions, expressing political views online, and in some contexts participating in demonstrations (Anduiza, Guinjoan, & Rico, 2019). However, the study did not find any relationship between populist attitudes and voting. Similarly, exposure to populist communication may contribute to increased online participation or other noninstitutionalized forms of political engagement, but it may not motivate people to vote. The existence of such a discrepancy cannot be determined within this dissertation but could have problematic

consequences. Again, this can be related to the changing relationship between citizens and the political and media elites and between the supply and the demand side. As Blumler (2016, p. 29) argues, the emergence of a political communication ecology with two levels—he refers to them as "institutionalized" vs. "grassroots"—may, on the one hand, lead to citizens' experience of higher levels of efficacy resulting from their ability to communicate more easily in peer-to-peer networks. On the other hand, citizens may continue to experience high inefficacy in their vertical communication with political elites and their impact on the government. Applying this to political online communication, liking, sharing, or commenting provides citizens with an easy means of responding directly and immediately to politicians or journalists online but may not actually translate into real-world political actions or influence. This "lopsided efficacy" (Blumler, 2013) may further deepen the perceived chasm between the people and the elite that is propagated by populist ideology.

Finally, this dissertation shows that specific groups are more likely to react to populist messages than others are. This finding corroborates earlier research and reinforces the argument that populist communication contributes to an increasing polarization of society into populist and anti-populist camps (see also Müller et al., 2017; Wirz, 2019). This is currently reflected in an increased legitimacy of extreme positions as well as an increasingly hardened conflict between opposing political camps in several Western countries. Examples are the 'Remain' vs. 'Leave' campaigns with regard to the 'Brexit', proponents vs. opponents of President Trump, or pro- vs. anti-immigration groups in Europe. The rhetoric in these conflicts is increasingly Manichean, hostile, and absolutistic. Moderate positions and compromises no longer seem to have room in these discussions. Taken together with the findings that populist messages trigger more populist messages and that people with higher populist attitudes are generally more active online, this may discourage more moderate citizens from voicing their opinions in online discussions in a spiral of silence (see also Zerback & Fawzi, 2016) or create "echo chambers" or niches of populism (Walter et al., 2016 argue similarly with regard to user comments on climate change). These developments present politicians, journalists, and citizens with major challenges and require further investigation. I hope that my dissertation will provide the foundation and serve as inspiration for such future research.

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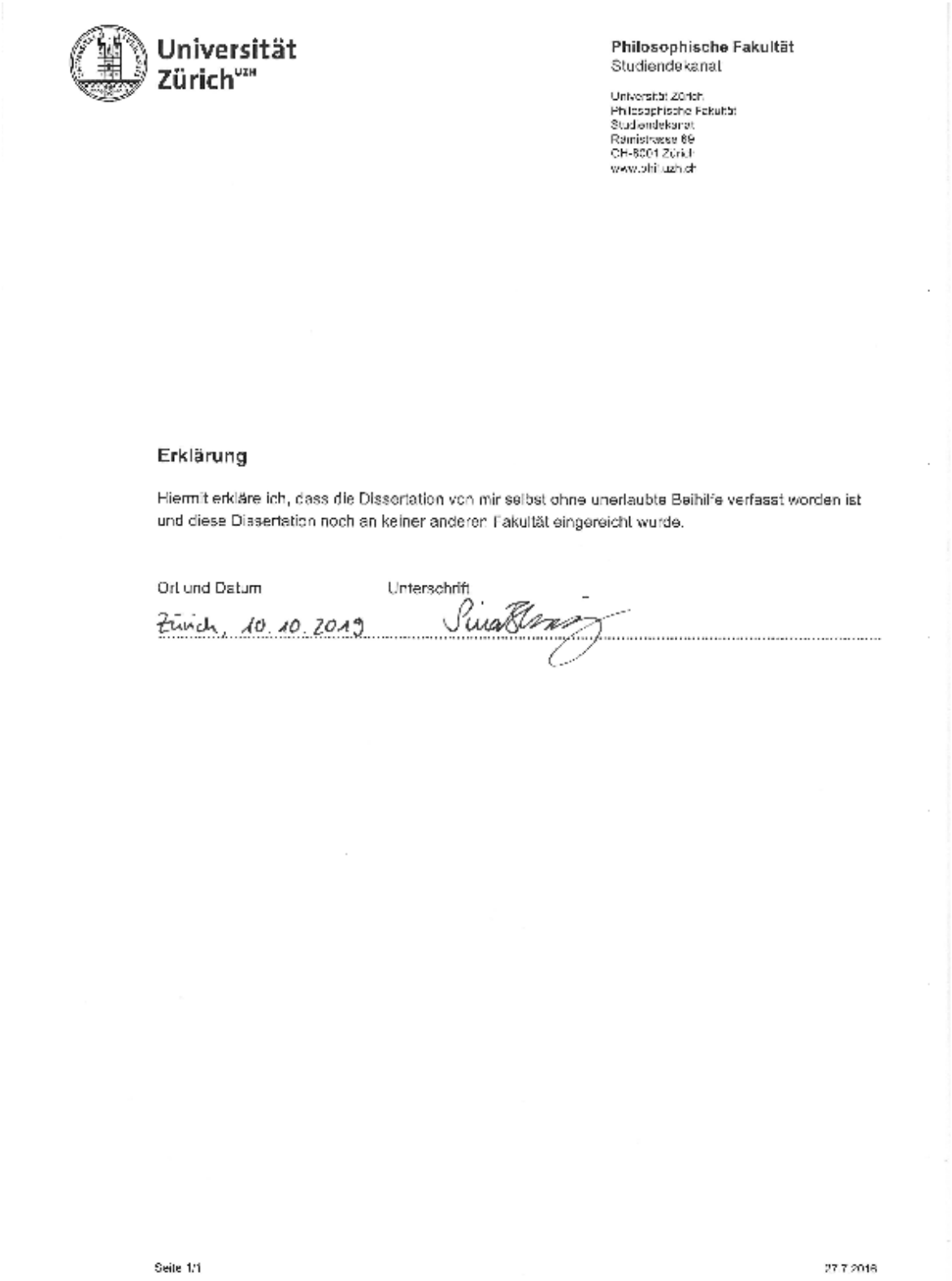
APPENDIX

A. Statement of Authorship



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Erklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich, dass die Dissertation von mir selbst ohne unerlaubte Beihilfe verfasst worden ist und diese Dissertation noch an keiner anderen Fakultät eingereicht wurde.

Ort und Datum: Zürich, 10.10.2019

Unterschrift: Silvia Blaser

Seite 1/1

27.7.2016

B. Author's Own Contribution for Co-Authored Publications

Disclosure of own contribution for joint publications in accordance with § 7 (3) of the Regulations for Obtaining the Doctoral Degree at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Zürich, July 8 2009 (PVO 2009).

Article I

Title: Populist Communication in Talk Shows and Social Media: A Comparative Analysis in Four Countries

Researchers involved: Sina Blassnig (SB), Nicole Ernst (NE), Florin Büchel (FB), Sven Engesser (SE)

	Limited contribution	Substantial contribution
Conceptualization (main idea, theory)	NE, SE, FB	SB
Methodology (design, operationalization)	NE, FB, SE	SB
Data collection		SB
Data analysis		SB
Writing (original draft preparation)	NE, FB, SE	SB
Writing (review and editing)	NE, FB, SE	SB
Conference presentations		SB
Visualizations		SB

Article II

Title: Populism in Online Election Coverage: Analyzing populist statements by politicians, journalists, and readers in three countries

Researchers involved: Sina Blassnig (SB), Nicole Ernst (NE), Florin Büchel (FB), Sven Engesser (SE), & Frank Esser (FE)

	Limited contribution	Substantial contribution
Conceptualization (main idea, theory)	NE, FB, SE, FE	SB
Methodology (design, operationalization)		SB, SE, FE
Data collection		SB, SE
Data analysis		SB
Writing (original draft preparation)	NE, FB, SE, FE	SB
Writing (review and editing)	NE, FB, SE, FE	SB
Conference presentations		SB
Visualizations		SB

Article III

Title: Populism and Social Media Popularity: How populist communication benefits political leaders on Facebook and Twitter

Researchers involved: Sina Blassnig (SB), Nicole Ernst (NE), Sven Engesser (SE) & Frank Esser (FE); Members of the NCCR Democracy Phase III, Module II (NCCR)

	Limited contribution	Substantial contribution
Conceptualization (Main idea, theory)	FE, SE	SB, NE
Methodology (design, operationalization)		SB, NE, NCCR
Data collection		NCCR
Data analysis		SB
Writing (original draft preparation)	NE, SE, FE	SB
Writing (review and editing)	NE, SE, FE	SB
Conference presentations		SB
Visualizations		SB

Article IV

Title: Hitting a Nerve: Populist News Articles Lead to More Frequent and More Populist Reader Comments

Researchers involved: Sina Blassnig (SB), Sven Engesser (SE), Nicole Ernst (NE) & Frank Esser (FE)

	Limited contribution	Substantial contribution
Conceptualization (main idea, theory)	NE, FE	SB, SE
Methodology (design, operationalization)		SB, SE, FE
Data collection		SB, SE
Data analysis		SB
Writing (original draft preparation)	NE, SE, FE	SB
Writing (review and editing)	NE, FE	SB, SE
Conference presentations		SB
Visualizations		SB

Article V

Title: Populist and Popular: An Experiment on the Drivers of User Reactions to Populist Posts on Facebook

Researchers involved: Sina Blassnig (SB), Dominique Wirz (DW)

	Limited contribution	Substantial contribution
Conceptualization (main idea, theory)		SB, DW
Methodology (design, operationalization)		SB, DW
Data collection		SB, DW
Data analysis	DW	SB
Writing (original draft preparation)	DW	SB
Writing (review and editing)		SB, DW
Conference presentations		*TBD*
Visualizations		SB

The co-authors herewith confirm the author contribution statement:

Zurich, 20 Oct 2019
Location and Date

Prof. Dr. Frank Esser
Main supervisor and co-author

Dresden. 30.9.19
Location and Date

Prof. Dr. Sven Erigesser
Co-author

Zürich, 26.9.2019
Location and Date

Dr. Nicole Ernst
Co-author

Zürich, 7.10.2019
Location and Date

Dr. Florin Büchel
Co-author

Zürich, 27.9.19
Location and Date

Dr. Dominique S. Wirz
Co-author

C. Curriculum Vitae

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RESEARCH INTERESTS

Political communication, populism, digital communication, media systems, comparative media research

SKILLS

Content analysis, experimental research, survey research, multivariate statistics

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

2016 – present	PhD candidate at the Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research, Department of International & Comparative Media Research, University of Zurich, Switzerland (Prof. Dr. Frank Esser)
June 2019	Research stay at the Smart Family Institute of Communications, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Host researcher: Prof. Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt)
2013 – 2015	Master of Arts in Social Science, University of Zurich, Switzerland Major: Communication Science and Media Research Minor: Political Science Thesis: *Populist Communication in the Self-Presentation of Politicians. A Comparative Analysis of Talk Shows, Facebook, and Twitter in Switzerland, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States*. Master thesis, University of Zurich, Switzerland
2009 – 2012	Bachelor of Arts in Social Science, University of Zurich Major: Communication Science and Media Research 1st Minor: Political Science, 2nd Minor: Theory and History of Photography

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

2016 – present	Research and teaching assistant at the Institute of Communication and Media Research, Department of International & Comparative Media Research, University of Zurich, Switzerland (Prof. Dr. Frank Esser)
2016 – 2017	Employed in the project „Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics" funded by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF)

2010 – 2015	Student teaching and research assistant (in various positions and projects for Prof. Dr. Frank Esser and Prof. Dr. Otfried Jarren)

NON-ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

2013	Junior communications manager, swissnex San Francisco, USA (6 months)
2012	Communications intern, communications office, Government Council of the Canton of Zurich, Switzerland (4 months)
2011 – 2012	PR trainee, Weibel Communication AG, Zollikon, Switzerland

PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

Blassnig, S., & Wirz, D. S. (2019). Populist and popular: An experiment on the drivers of user reactions to populist posts on Facebook. *Social Media + Society*, *5* (4), 1-12.

Blassnig, S., Engesser, S., Ernst, N., & Esser, F. (2019). Hitting a nerve: Populist news articles lead to more frequent and more populist reader comments. *Political Communication.* Advance online publication, 1-23.

Blassnig, S., Ernst, N., Büchel, F., Engesser, S., & Esser, F. (2019). Populism in online election coverage: Analyzing populist statements by politicians, journalists, and readers in three countries. *Journalism Studies*, 20 (8), 1110-1129.

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Blassnig, S., Ernst, N., Büchel, F., & Engesser, S. (2018). Populist communication in talk shows and social media: A comparative content analysis in four countries. *SCM Studies in Communication | Media*, 7 (3), 338-363.

Ernst, N., Blassnig, S., Engesser, S., & Esser, F. (2019). Populists prefer social media over talk shows: An analysis of populist messages and stylistic elements across six countries. *Social Media + Society*, 5 (1), 1-14.

Ernst, N., Esser, F., Blassnig, S., & Engesser, S. (2019). Favorable opportunity structures for populist communication: Comparing different types of politicians and issues in social media, television and the press. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24 (2), 165-188.

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Book Chapters in Edited Volumes

Blassnig, S.; Ernst, N.; Engesser, S.; & Esser, F. (forthcoming): Populism and social media popularity: How populist communication benefits political leaders on Facebook and Twitter. In D. Taras & R. Davis (Ed.): *Power Shift? Political Leadership and Social Media*. Routledge.

Blassnig, S., Rodi, P., Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K., Adamczewska, K., Raycheva, L., Engesser, S., & Esser, F. (2019). Dimensions, speakers, and targets: basic patterns in European media reporting on populism. Reinemann, C., Stanyer, J., Aalberg, T., Esser, F., & de

Vreese, C. H. (Eds.). *Communicating populism. Comparing actor perceptions, media coverage, and effects on citizens in Europe*, Routledge, 71-101.

Esser, F., Stępińska, A., Pekacek, O., Seddone, A., Papathanassopoulos, S., Peicheva, D., Milojevic, A., Blassnig, S., & Engesser, S. (2019). Event-, politics-, and audience-driven news: a comparison of populism in European media coverage in 2016 and 2017. Reinemann, C., Stanyer, J., Aalberg, T., Esser, F., & de Vreese, C. H. (Eds.). *Communicating populism. Comparing actor perceptions, media coverage, and effects on citizens in Europe*, Routledge, 123-40.

PRESENTATIONS

Populism as a trigger for reader comments: Populist news articles lead to populist audience reactions. *Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA)*, Washington DC, May 24-28 2019.

Does populist communication make politicians more popular on Facebook and Twitter? A six-country analysis. *Annual Conference of the ICA*, Washington DC, May 24-28 2019.

Favorable opportunity structures for populist communication: Comparing different types of politicians and issues in social media, television and the press. *Annual Conference of the ICA*, Washington DC, May 24-28 2019 (presented by N. Ernst).

Mehr Likes durch populistische Kommunikation? Eine Analyse von Facebook-Reaktionen im deutschen und österreichischen Wahlkampf 2017. [More likes through populist communication? An analysis of Facebook reactions in the German and Austrian election campaign 2017]. *Annual Conference of the German Communication Association (DGPuK),* Münster, May 9-11 2019 (presented by A. Staender).

Die Facebook-Resonanz deutscher und österreichischer Parteien im Wahlkampf. [The Facebook response to German and Austrian parties in election campaigns]. *Annual Conference of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SGKM)*, St. Gallen, April 4-5 2019.

Populism and social media popularity: How populist communication benefits political actors on Facebook and Twitter in six countries. *Conference of the Research Section "Comparative Politics" of the German Political Science Association,* Munich, March 21-23 2019.

The effect of populist communication on social media popularity cues: How political leaders use populist key messages on Facebook and Twitter. *Presentation at the Bi-Annual Conference of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA)*, Lugano, Switzerland, October 31 – November 3 2018.

Populism in online news: How politicians, journalists, and readers disseminate populist messages during election times. *Annual Conference of the ICA*, Prague, Czech Republic, May 24-28 2018.

Where populists prefer to spread their messages: An analysis of social media and talk shows in six countries. *Annual Conference of the ICA*, Prague, Czech Republic, May 24-28 2018 (presented by N. Ernst).

Populisten in den Medien. Eine Framinganalyse der AfD und FPÖ in deutschen und österreichischen Qualitäts- und Boulevardmedien. [Populists in the media. A framing analysis of the AfD and FPÖ in German and Austrian quality and tabloid media]. *Annual Meeting of the Communication and Politics Division of the DGPuK*, Fribourg, February 8-10 2018 (presented by R. Schwab & J. Haslach).

«Argumentum Popularis» – Populism and the use of argumentative fallacies. *Interim Conference of the Political Communication Section of the ECREA*, Zurich, November 22-23 2017.

Populist online communication: Self-presentation, media representation, and audience reconstruction of political actors. *ICA Political Communication PhD Student Preconference*, San Diego, USA, May 25 2017.

Extreme parties and populism: An analysis of Facebook and Twitter across six countries. *Annual Conference of the ICA*, San Diego, USA, May 25-29 2017 (presented by N. Ernst).

Populist communication in the self-presentation of politicians: A comparative content analysis of talk shows, Facebook, and Twitter in Switzerland, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. *Bi-Annual Conference of ECREA*, Prague, Czech Republic, November 9-12 2016.

Populist communication in the self-presentation of politicians: A comparative content analysis of talk shows, Facebook, and Twitter in Switzerland, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. *Populism In, By, and Against the Media.* Pre-Conference of the *Annual Conference of the ICA,* Fukuoka, Japan, June 9 2016.

INVITED TALKS

Trends in der digitalen Kommunikation. Trends, Herausforderungen und Kennzahlen aus Sicht der Forschung. [Trends in digital communication. Trends, challenges and key figures from a research perspective.] *Forum Digital Communication, Swiss Federal Chancellery,* Bern, Switzerland, August 22 2019.

GRANTS & AWARDS

2018	GRC Travel Grant by the University of Zurich for a research stay at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Host researcher: Prof. Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt
2016	Semester Award by the University of Zurich for outstanding scholarly work for the Master's thesis with the title "Populist Communication in the Self-Presentation of Politicians: A Comparative Analysis of Talk Shows, Facebook, and Twitter in Switzerland, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States."

TEACHING

Fall 2019	Research seminar (BA level) and supervision of Bachelor theses: Wahlen 2019: Politische Kommunikation in der Schweiz [Elections 2019: Political communication in Switzerland], IKMZ, University of Zurich, Switzerland (co-teaching with A. Staender)
Spring 2019 & Fall 2018	Research seminar (BA level) and supervision of Bachelor theses: Populistische Kommunikation im digitalen Zeitalter [Populist communication in digital times], IKMZ, University of Zurich, Switzerland (co-teaching with N. Ernst)

Spring 2018	Seminar (BA level): Politische Kommunikation zwischen Likes, Shares & User Comments [Political communication between likes, shares & user comments], IKMZ, University of Zurich, Switzerland
Fall 2017	Lecture (BA level): Grundlagen der Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft I & II [Introduction to Communication Science and Media Research I & II], Co-teaching, IKMZ, University of Zurich, Switzerland (co-teaching with F. Esser, N. Ernst, & B. Fretwurst)
Spring 2017 & Fall 2016	Research seminar (BA level) and supervision of Bachelor theses: Erfolgreiche Populisten in ganz Europa: Welche Rolle übernehmen die Medien? [Successful populists across Europe: What role do the media play?], IKMZ, University of Zurich, Switzerland (co-teaching with N. Ernst)

SUPERVISED THESES

Haslach, Julia (2019). Veränderte bzw. neue Medienlogik im Zeitalter digitaler Medien: Von einer Commercial Logic zu einer Public Logic in der politischen Berichterstattung? [Changed or new media logic in the age of digital media: From a commercial logic to a public logic in political news reports?]. Master Thesis, University of Zurich.

Pfister, Dominic (2018). Populistische Kommunikation in Onlinezeitungen der Schweiz und des Vereinigten Königreichs. Eine Inhaltsanalyse der Wahlkampfberichterstattung 2015. [Populist communication in online-news in Switzerland and the United Kingdom. An analysis of the election campaign coverage 2015.] Master Thesis, University of Zurich.

ACTIVITIES, SERVICES & MEMBERSHIPS

Student and early career representative for the Political Communication Division of the International Communication Association (ICA) (elected in October 2019)

PhD and postdoc representative at the Department of Mass Communication and Media Research (IKMZ), University of Zurich (since September 2019)

Substitute Member of the Management Committee of COST Action IS1308 on "Populist Political Communication in Europe" (2016-2018)

Memberships:

- International Communication Association (ICA)
- European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA)
- German Communication Association (DGPuK)
- Young Scholar Network of the Division "Political Communication" of the DGPuK (NaPoKo)
- Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SGKM)

D. Copies of Individual Publications of Cumulative Thesis

On the following pages (in the order previously used), the individual contributions are attached in their published or accepted form.

D.1 Article I

Populist Communication in Talk Shows and Social Media: A Comparative Content Analysis in Four Countries

Sina Blassnig, Nicole Ernst, Florin Büchel, & Sven Engesser

This article was originally published in:

[Blassnig, S., Ernst, N., Büchel, F., & Engesser, S. (2018). Populist Communication in Talk Shows and Social Media: A Comparative Content Analysis in Four Countries. *SCM Studies in Communication | Media*, 7 (3), 338-363. DOI: 10.5771/2192-4007-2018-3-338]

SCM
Studies in Communication and Media

FULL PAPER

Populist communication in talk shows and social media
A comparative content analysis in four countries

Populistische Kommunikation in Talk-Shows und Social Media
Eine vergleichende Inhaltsanalyse in vier Ländern

Sina Blassnig, Nicole Ernst, Florin Büchel & Sven Engesser

Sina Blassnig (M.A.), Department of Communication and Media Research, University of Zurich, Andreasstrasse 15, 8050 Zürich, Switzerland, Contact: s.blassnig(at)ikmz.uzh.ch

Nicole Ernst (M.A.), Department of Communication and Media Research, University of Zurich, Andreasstrasse 15, 8050 Zürich, Switzerland, Contact: n.ernst(at)ikmz.uzh.ch

Florin Büchel (Dr.), Department of Communication and Media Research, University of Zurich, Andreasstrasse 15, 8050 Zürich, Switzerland, Contact: florin.buechel(at)uzh.ch

Sven Engesser (Prof. Dr.), Institute of Media and Communication, Technische Universität Dresden, Zellescher Weg 17, 01069 Dresden, Germany, Contact: sven.engesser(at)tu-dresden.de

FULL PAPER

Populist communication in talk shows and social media
A comparative content analysis in four countries

Populistische Kommunikation in Talk-Shows und Social Media
Eine vergleichende Inhaltsanalyse in vier Ländern

Sina Blassnig, Nicole Ernst, Florin Büchel & Sven Engesser

Abstract: To understand populism, it is crucial to understand populist political communication. We investigate how politicians across the political spectrum employ populist communication in different non-institutionalized communication arenas. Populism is defined as a thin ideology and three dimensions of populist communication are distinguished: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion. We analyze politicians' statements in talk shows and social media (Twitter and Facebook) in four Western democracies. The analysis shows that populist communication is context-dependent and that the use of the three dimensions varies across political systems, media channels, and party types.

Keywords: Populism, political communication, talk show, social media, political parties

Zusammenfassung: Um Populismus zu verstehen, ist es essentiell populistische politische Kommunikation zu verstehen. Wir untersuchen, wie Politiker entlang des politischen Spektrums populistische Kommunikation in verschiedenen nicht-institutionalisierten Kommunikationsarenen verwenden. Populismus wird als dünne Ideologie definiert und drei Dimensionen populistischer Kommunikation werden unterschieden: Volks-Zentrismus, Anti-Elitismus und Exklusion. Wir analysieren Aussagen von Politikern in Talk-Shows und sozialen Medien (Twitter und Facebook) in vier westlichen Demokratien. Die Analyse zeigt, dass populistische Kommunikation kontextabhängig ist und dass die Nutzung der drei Dimensionen über politische Systeme, Medienkanäle und Parteitypen hinweg variiert.

Schlagwörter: Populismus, politische Kommunikation, Talk-Show, soziale Medien, politische Parteien

1. Introduction

Populism has been highly topical in the mass media and the scientific debate (i.a. Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Taggart, 2004; Torre, 2015). A crucial aspect to understand political populism is to understand populist political communication (Stanyer, Salgado, & Strömbäck, 2017). Political communication is the central mechanism in the articulation of political interests, their aggregation, as well as their implementation and the legitimization of political decisions.

The role of politicians as communicators has become increasingly important (Sheafer, Shenhav, & Balmas, 2014). Moreover, empirical research shows that populist messages can have far-reaching effects on citizens such as reinforcing populist attitudes or contributing to opinion polarization (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017). Therefore, we follow a *communication-centered approach* (Stanyer et al., 2017) and address the first research question: *How do politicians employ populist communication?*

Many studies have investigated populism in the mass media (e.g. Akkerman, 2011; Bos, van der Brug, & Vreese, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn, 2014b), party or election manifestos (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Rooduijn, De Lange, & van der Brug, 2014), or political speeches (Hawkins, 2009, 2010). Yet, only very few have examined populist communication in talk shows (Bos & Brants, 2014; Cranmer, 2011) or social media (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Groshek & Engelbert, 2012; Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016).

These communication channels are, however, the perfect arena to investigate politicians' self-presentation because they are hybrid forms of mediality (Chadwick, 2013): They combine different media logics and offer different degrees of freedom for politicians' self-presentation. Due to this hybridization, these communication channels provide the ideal combination between outreach and control to politicians. This may be especially attractive for populist actors who try to reach a large audience as unmediated as possible.

Research on political populism – especially in Europe – has often focused on radical right-wing parties (see Mudde, 2007) and pre-defined populist political actors. However, in theory, populism has been described as "chameleon" (Taggart, 2000, p. 5) or "empty shell" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 324) that "lacks core values" (Taggart, 2004, p. 274). This implies that populism is not constrained to a specific political camp and can be complemented with different ideological elements, resulting in varying types of populism. This is especially relevant with regard to populist communication. Indeed, previous research has shown that both right-wing and left-wing, and even mainstream politicians, use populist communication (Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Therefore, this study investigates populism in the communication of politicians across the political spectrum.

We consider *populist communication* as the expression of *populist ideology* and analyze *populist key messages* that are related to the content (the *what*) of populist communication (in contrast to populist communication style, which refers to the *how*) (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). Following a communication-centered approach, political actors can be described as *more* or *less* populist (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017) "based on the extent to which they engage in populist communication" (Stanyer et al., 2017, p. 353). If we assume that political actors are not *either* populist *or* non-populist but *more* or *less* populist, this raises the second research question: *How does the use of populist communication depend on the contextual setting?*

The aim of this study is to assess how politicians of different party families employ three dimensions of populist communication – people-centrism, anti-elit-

ism, and exclusion – in their self-presentation across different contextual settings (country specifics and media setting). The analysis is based on a quantitative content analysis comparing politicians' self-presentation in political talk shows and on social media (Twitter and Facebook) in Switzerland, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

2. Defining populism

Populism was long seen as a "notoriously vague term" (Canovan, 1999, p. 3). It has been defined as an ideology, a political strategy, a style, or a discourse (Hawkins, 2010; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001). Despite this lack of consensus and conceptual clarity, in the last few years scholars have increasingly agreed to conceive political populism as a *thin* ideology (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Wirth et al., 2016) and to understand it as a "set of ideas" (Hawkins, 2009; Rooduijn, 2014b; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Taggart, 2000). Currently one of the most popular and most applied definitions of political populism is by Mudde (2004, p. 543), who describes populism as

> an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups – 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.

Following this definition, populist ideology first states the existence of a homogenous and 'good' people and demands its empowerment and sovereignty. Second, populist ideology juxtaposes the people to the elite in a normative and moralistic manner. It presents a Manichean worldview in which "the Good people are exploited by the Evil elite" (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017, p. 2). Third, these first two aspects of populist ideology are dependent on a monolithic conception of 'the people' with a common understanding of the world. Thus, populism treats 'the people' as a homogenous category, a discrete entity, or a corporate body that is capable of having common interests, common desires, and a common will. This monolithic conception also implies that there are some specific segments of the population – "the dangerous 'others'" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3) – that do not share 'the people's' 'good' characteristics, values, and opinions. These out-groups are excluded from 'the people' and seen as a threat or a burden to society (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

We conceive populism as a thin ideology that can be combined with different ideological positions from the left to the right, thus, with more substantive, thicker ideologies like nationalism or socialism. It has been disputed where the line is to be drawn between the thin populist ideology and the add-on ideologies, in particular with regard to the exclusion of 'others' (see Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). While some authors see it as a constitutive element of populism (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, & Vreese, 2017) and argue that there is a type of *excluding populism* (where exclusion substitutes anti-elitism) (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), others

consider the exclusion of 'others' only as a part of right-wing populism (Rooduijn, 2014a; Wirth et al., 2016). We assume an intermediate position. Following Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, and de Vreese (2017), we argue that the construction of specific out-groups is inherent in the populist construction of a monolithic 'people' as a favored in-group. Depending on the conception of the people each type of populism holds, the respective out-groups vary. However, not all types of populism necessarily exclude specific social groups from the people and not all types of populism are equally explicit in their exclusion. In this regard, it is valuable to include exclusion as a dimension of populism in our theoretical model to differentiate between different types of populism.

3. Populist communication

The definition of populism as an ideology is not without its critics (see Aslanidis, 2016). Other authors have conceived populism rather as a communication style, discourse or frame (Aslanidis, 2016; Bos et al., 2011; Canovan, 1999; Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Laclau, 2005). We argue that these approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see also Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). While the ideological core of populism often remains hidden, populist communication is open to our observation and may be used to identify populist actors empirically (Kriesi, 2014; Stanyer et al., 2017).

Based on our definition of populism as an ideology, we focus on the *content* of populist communication or *populist key messages* (*What?*) – in contrast to *populist style*, which is interested in the *form* of populist communication (*How?*) (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). Building on the theoretical considerations on populist ideology and the existing literature discussing populist communication (Cranmer, 2011; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Reinemann et al., 2017; Wirth et al., 2016), we derive three dimensions of populist key messages: *people-centrism*, *anti-elitism*, and *exclusion*.

People-centrism relates to the first core element of populist ideology, the homogenous 'pure' people. However, not all references to the people are populist. We consider five key messages as populist: If a political actor 1) speaks in the name of 'the people' and claims to defend its will (*advocacy*); 2) claims to be accountable to 'the people' and refers to the importance of responding to 'the people's' will (*accountability*); 3) uses a reference to 'the people' to legitimize certain claims (*legitimacy*); 4) demands the sovereignty of 'the people' *(demanding popular sovereignty);* or 5) describes 'the people' as homogenous (*stating a monolithic people*) (Cranmer, 2011). The first three key messages relate directly to the in-group favoritism of the 'good' people. By way of populist communication, political actors try to appeal to the people, identify with the people, and justify their actions with the will of the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). *Demanding sovereignty of the people* captures the ideological element of the primacy of 'the people'. It entails the idea that 'the people's' will should have priority over other regulatory mechanisms such as laws or morals (e.g. human rights or supranational law). Consequently, only what is decided by the popular will is right (Kriesi, 2014). *Stating a monolithic people* means treating 'the people' as a united and indivisible entity with

common feelings, common desires, and a common will, which is also central to populist ideology. It is in direct contrast to a pluralist vision of the people with many diverse values and opinions (Abts & Rummens, 2007).

The second dimension, *anti-elitism*, refers to the vertical differentiation between the people and the elite. First, populist anti-elitist key messages emphasize the distance and estrangement between the people and the elites. The elites are differentiated and excluded from the people by depicting them as being above ordinary citizens, out of touch with reality, and ignoring the people's will. Second, the elites are denounced as corrupt or incompetent. Third, they are blamed for any failures, problems, and undesirable developments in politics and society. The elite can thereby not only be political but also economic, cultural, or the media elite (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

The third dimension of populist communication is the rhetorical *exclusion* of specific social out-groups from the people. This refers to a differentiation along the *horizontal* dimension. As mentioned earlier, a typical element of populism is that the people are seen as a homogenous and monolithic body, while some specific population segments are excluded (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). In contrast to the elite, these out-groups are not above but within the people, thus subject to a horizontal differentiation. Although, according to Abts and Rummens (2007) it can also be seen as a second vertical antagonism since it is often a downward comparison between the people and groups that are considered the "bottom of society." Similarly to the elites, these out-groups can take on various forms depending on the constitution of the people as a nation, class, or ethnos (Canovan, 1999; Mény & Surel, 2000; Pasquino, 2008).

As these dimensions are directly derived from populist ideology, it is assumed that populist communicative content expresses the core ideas of populist ideology and translates them into typical claims, attributions, accusations, and demands that are conceived as populist key messages. However, the political actors do not have to be aware of the key messages they use. As mentioned above, following a communication-centered approach, it is seen as an empirical question to what degree a political actor is populist. Furthermore, political actors' communication can be more or less populist depending on the situational context.

4. Contextual factors and hypotheses

The first aspect investigated in this study refers to specific factors on the country level that may influence the occurrence of populist communication in politicians' self-presentation. Political communication is highly dependent on the contextual setting of different political systems (Pfetsch & Esser, 2012). Therefore, structural and situational macro-level factors are also expected to influence the use of populist communication (Reinemann et al., 2017). In this study, we focus primarily on more formal and long-term structural factors. Different systems of government and different electoral systems may provide different incentives and constraints for political actors to communicate in a populist manner. With regard to the system of government, we expect that in presidential systems, politicians have more incentives to speak populist than in parliamentary systems due to a higher per-

sonalization and the "plebiscitarian legitimacy" of presidents (Linz, 1990; O'Donell, 1994). In a directorial system, in contrast, political communication is expected to be less populist. According to Lijphart (1999, p. 274), consensus democracies are overall "kinder" and "gentler". The collegial government and consensus orientation lead to a low concentration of media attention on national leaders or specific politicians (Kriesi, 2012), a need to form mandatory catch-all coalitions, and, thus, to lower incentives for politicians to use populist communication. With respect to the electoral system, drawing on Swanson and Mancini (1996) and Esser, de Vreese, and Hopmann (2017), we expect that majoritarian systems encourage more people-centrist and anti-elitist rhetoric due to unlikely coalitions, higher personalization, lower need to negotiate compromises, and a plebiscitarian legitimacy of the members of parliament. In proportional systems, on the other hand, politicians are less encouraged to adopt populist communication since the prospect of likely coalitions is expected to constrain anti-elitism, and elections via party-lists may provide fewer incentives for a people-centrist rhetoric.

Of course, additional historical, cultural, or situational factors may contribute to the extent of populist communication in a given political system (Reinemann et al., 2017). These factors are confounded with aspects of the political system and, thus, cannot be controlled for. Therefore, we formulate a hypothesis that is based on the formal structures of the political systems, in order to test whether these aspects alone can explain variations in the extent of populist communication. Based on these theoretical considerations, we would expect the self-presentation of politicians to be most populist in the United States (presidential, majoritarian), followed by the United Kingdom (parliamentary, majoritarian) and Switzerland (directorial/direct-democratic, proportional), and lowest in Germany (parliamentary, proportional). This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Politicians' communication is most populist in the United States, followed by the United Kingdom and Switzerland, and lowest in Germany.

Our second level of comparison is the communication channel. In a hybrid media system, political actors rely on a variety of different communication channels, whose logics complement each other (Chadwick, 2013). Comparing populist communication across different media platforms acknowledges this reality of the contemporary media environment (Bode & Vraga, 2017). Furthermore, it allows analyzing whether and how the context and affordances of different platforms influence the use of populist communication. This is highly relevant, because earlier research shows that the amount of populist communication is influenced by characteristics of the public setting and the communication channel (Cranmer, 2011; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel et al., 2017). The incentives to apply populist communication are higher in a media context compared to non-public settings, since the media provide a perfect stage for populists to present themselves and win voters (Mudde, 2004). This is connected to the assumption that populist communication complies with news values and media logic (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008, 2014). Thus, intentionally or not, media can provide a

conducive platform for populist communication. Political actors may of course also anticipate and exploit this.

Talk shows are often associated with a "tabloidization process" that fosters media logic and therefore could encourage the use of populist communication (Albertazzi, 2008). First, political discussions in talk shows follow a highly audience-oriented logic, which is favorable for populist communication (Landerer, 2013). The frequent presence or even participation of a live audience could specifically trigger people-centrist key messages. Second, the direct confrontation of political adversaries may foster the conflictive dimensions of populist communication (anti-elitism and exclusion). The sharp language, negativity, and taboo-breaking that are often inherent to anti-elitist and excluding statements also perfectly fit media logic and news values (Esser, Stępińska et al., 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008). Third, the apprehension of media logic as well as the competition for attention could make politicians more prone to use populist communication. Thus, talk shows may provide specific incentives for politicians to adopt a more populist communication. This assumption is also supported by the empirical results of Bos and Brants (2014), who show that populism is more prominent in talk shows compared to various other news media outlets.

New media such as social media, on the contrary, provide new platforms for politicians where they are less dependent on news media logic and are potentially less influenced by processes like mediatization (Sheafer et al., 2014). However, there are also indications that the network logic of social media may be an opportunity for populists to circumvent media institutions and journalistic gatekeepers (Engesser, Ernst et al., 2017). Furthermore, it has been observed that new media platforms such as Twitter may be used by populist politicians as a tool of permanent opposition against mainstream parties (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). In turn, theoretically, talk shows could also act as pluralist communication arenas that promote a rather deliberative than populist dialogue (Kessler & Lachenmaier, 2017). However, Kessler and Lachenmaier (2017) show that, empirically, politicians' speeches in political talk shows are mostly focused on dominance, allegations, proclamations, personalization, and the creation of closeness to the audience. Thus, contextual aspects of talk shows such as their immediacy, staged informality, confrontation, and audience-orientation may foster the use of populist communication in the heat of an interview situation or panel discussion. Deduced from these arguments, the second hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Politicians' communication is more populist in political talk shows than on social media.

Finally, differences in the usage of populist communication are expected in connection with party association. Although, following Cranmer (2011), it is assumed that the use of populist communication is not exclusively bound to politicians of specific parties, we expect the extent of populist communication (respectively of its three sub-dimensions) to be different for politicians of different types of parties. Specifically, politicians of pole parties are more prone to employ populist communication than moderate or center party politicians (Ernst et al., 2017). Similar to opposition parties, pole parties often oppose the governing and

'mainstream' parties, denouncing them as "cartel" or as being "indifferent to the desires of ordinary citizens" (Katz & Mair, 2009, p. 759) thereby emphasizing responsiveness to voters' demands over responsibility (Mair, 2002, 2009). Moreover, populism has become an attractive alternative for radical political actors to overcome the stigma of being associated with fascism, Nazism, or communism (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). The assumption that politicians of radical parties on both extremes of the political spectrum are particularly inclined to employ populist communication is also supported by comparative content analyses of party manifestos (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Steenbergen & Weber, 2015), press releases (Bernhard, 2016), and social media (Ernst et al., 2017).

Following these theoretical considerations and empirical findings, we argue that political actors across the whole spectrum of political ideology employ populist communication but that the extent of populism depends on how extreme political actors are positioned. We expect that political actors on both opposite ends of the political left-right spectrum use more populist key messages than moderate and center political actors. Thus, follows the third hypothesis:

H3: Politicians of pole parties use more populist key messages than politicians of moderate or center parties.

5. Data collection and sample

The four countries – Switzerland (CH), Germany (DE), the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) – are chosen because they are broadly similar but distinguish themselves in several dimensions of their political systems. This allows to explain differences and similarities in the use of populist communication through different contextual settings and to reach insights beyond a single country (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). All four selected countries are established Western democracies and they have seen a rise of populist actors or movements in the last few years. Yet, the strength and the institutionalized success of these actors varies between the four selected countries. Moreover, the countries differ in crucial aspects of their political system. First, they represent different systems of government: The United Kingdom and Germany have a parliamentary system, the United States has a presidential system, and Switzerland – being an exception – a directorial system with direct-democratic elements (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000). Second, the selected countries have different electoral systems and therefore different candidate selection modes: While the United States and the United Kingdom have a majoritarian election system (first-past-the-post; in the US with caucuses and primaries), Germany and Switzerland have a system of proportional representation (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000). This permits us to investigate populist communication in varying political and electoral settings.

Politicians' statements are analyzed in political talk shows, Facebook posts, and Tweets. These communication channels are chosen deliberately: Since this study focuses on politicians' self-presentation, thus, on how politicians communicate and present themselves and not on how they are represented by the media, it is useful to select media channels with as little journalistic influence as possible.

Talk shows and social media suit these needs perfectly: They are used by politicians not only to discuss current topics and issues, but also for self-presentational reasons such as connecting with their voters, mobilizing supporters, and shaping their image (Lee, 2013; Schütz, 1995). In that sense, both talk shows and social media can be conceived of as hybrid media in which different media logics coincide (Chadwick, 2013). In such formats, political actors can present themselves with a stronger situational control than in traditional mass media outlets or press releases. Nevertheless, the degree of publicity and control by the politicians varies between social media and talk shows – with the latter showing a slightly higher amount of journalistic control and a higher influence of news media logic than the former. It is therefore interesting to compare the use of populist key messages in these different formats.

Since the politicians under scrutiny in this investigation must be kept equal across both talk shows as well as social media, the most pragmatic approach is to sample the relevant talk shows first, then list all politicians appearing in these talk shows and add their social media account.[1] To do so, two political talk shows are selected for each country and four episodes in March through May 2014 are investigated (see Table 1). This three-month routine period was deliberately chosen in order to investigate the exact same time frame across all four countries. This way, we ensure that we capture debates on a variety of political issues – possibly also on transnational issues – and do not only analyze the communication of the main candidates or frontrunners, as it would be the case during election times. Moreover, most comparative studies investigating populism focus on election times. We therefore contribute to the field by analyzing the daily communication in a routine period. The chosen political talk shows are normal, routine time shows that are broadcast weekly and on a regular basis. To ensure comparability between the political talk shows in each country, several selection criteria have been identified in order to create functionally equivalent research objects across the countries. They represent the two most influential and highest market share talk shows[2] per country that cover political content, incorporate some sort of panel or roundtable discussion with politicians and other experts, focus the discussion mainly on current and crucial political issues, and have a duration of about 60 minutes. Only talk show episodes in which at least one politician appeared are incorporated in the sample. In general, only statements by politicians that are present live in the studio and part of the main discussion panel are included in the study.[3] Statements by the moderator, non-politicians in the panels,

1 There is an inherent selection bias in this sampling procedure in that politicians that regularly appear in talk shows are likely to show a certain media affinity and be popularly known. They also might be more controversial, provocative, and outspoken and, thus, more interesting for the media narrative. However, we argue that this is not problematic in the study at hand: Firstly, this selection bias is held constant across all politicians and thus affects all individual sampling decisions. Furthermore, such vocal politicians are also more likely to maintain a social media account.

2 Whenever possible, public as well as private channels have been selected. The shows themselves do not show a clear, explicit political bias (left or right).

3 Some exceptions had to be made for *The Andrew Marr Show, Meet the Press,* and *This Week* due to their different program designs and country specifics. In these shows, one-on-one interviews and video-interviews were also coded in addition to panel discussions.

and members of the audience are not coded. A new statement is coded if there was a change in the speaker, topic, or speaking situation.[4] Overall, 74 politicians appear in the selected talk show episodes (CH: 21, DE: 14, UK: 18, US: 21).

Table 1. Investigated talk shows

Country	CH		DE		UK		US	
Show	Arena	SonnTalk	Günther Jauch	Maybrit Illner	Andrew Marr Show	Question Time	Meet the Press	This Week
Channel	SRF 1	Tele Züri	ARD	ZDF	BBC 1	BBC 1	NBC	ABC
Public/ private	public	private	public	public	public	public	private	private

In a second step, official Facebook and Twitter profiles for each of the 74 appearing politicians are identified. Overall, 47 of the 74 politicians are present on one or both of these social media channels and their Tweets and Facebook status updates are analyzed for the same time period as the aired talk shows. By implementing this individual matching procedure on the micro level of politicians, the study ensures the comparability of communication on the two different media channels and thus avoids ecological fallacies. For each politician, a random sample of 20 Tweets and 20 Facebook posts is drawn from March 1st through May 31st, 2014. For those who have less than 20 Tweets or posts, the time period is extended to the whole year or, if necessary, to all of their Tweets and posts. Only Tweets and Facebook posts that include sufficient written content are taken into the sample. This excludes for example posts that only contain a link or a profile picture update. Tweets and Facebook posts are regarded as single statements, regardless of their length.

The time period is chosen so as to represent normal routine time. There were no national elections or extraordinary referendums in any of the investigated countries between March and May 2014. However, the United States had its midterm election on November 4th of the same year, and the European parliament election was held from May 22nd to May 25th. In Switzerland, one of its four annual popular votes took place on May 18th. Thus, the chosen material may contain statements that are connected to electoral or voting campaigns. All talk shows were recorded. Social media posts from Facebook and Twitter were obtained via Facepager (Keyling & Jünger, 2013). Both audiovisual and text files were manually coded and the intra-coder reliability is satisfactorily high: For all variables, Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorff's Alpha is above .60 and the agreement above 90 percent (overall average: .85, $\alpha = .85$). Overall, the final sample comprises 926 statements by 74 politicians in talk shows, 648 Facebook posts, and 880 Tweets (N = 2,454).

4 The speaking situation refers to the addressee of a statement. Does the politician address the moderator/journalist, another politician, non-political panel members, the present audience, or the disperse audience (the camera)?

6. Operationalization of populism

The main dependent variable is the extent of populist content in politicians' communication. Populist communication is operationalized building on previous literature (Cranmer, 2011; Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016), distinguishing the three dimensions discussed above: 1) people-centrism, 2) anti-elitism, and 3) exclusion.

People-centrism, comprises references to 'the people' that take the meaning of *1) advocacy, 2) accountability, 3) legitimacy, 4) demanding sovereignty of the people,* or *5) stating a monolithic people* as described in the theory section. References to the people can be made with words such as '(the) people', '(the) public', '(the) citizen(s)', '(the) voter(s)', '(the) taxpayer(s)', '(the) resident(s)', '(the) consumer(s)', '(the) population', or '(the) nation' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). However, only references to the people that adhere to one of the five people-centrist key messages are coded. *Anti-elitism*, is coded if a political actor blames or denounces an elite, their behavior, values etc., and/or detaches them from 'the people'. The elite can be political (parties, government, the state, institutions, etc.), economic (banks, multinationals, oligarchs, employers, etc.), cultural (intellectuals, universities, writers, etc.), or media elites (Canovan, 1999; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The third dimension, *exclusion,* is coded if a political actor denounces or blames specific societal groups or population segments – such as foreigners or religious groups – and excludes them from 'the people' (Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

The operationalization of populist communication, its three dimensions and sub-dimensions are summarized in Table 2. Each item is coded as a dummy variable. For all three dimensions of populist communication, maximum indices are constructed. This means that at least one item of the respective dimension has to be present in order to be considered people-centrist, anti-elitist, or exclusionist. The three dimensions are looked at separately, since earlier studies suggest that populist communication, especially in social media, occurs in a fragmented form (Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017).

Table 2. Operationalization of populist communication strategies

People-centrism: Politician makes an explicit reference to 'the people'
Advocacy: politician talks in the name/on behalf of 'the people', referring primarily to its will
Accountability: politician refers to the importance of responding to what is portrayed as 'the people's' will
Legitimacy: use of 'the people' to legitimize certain claims
Demanding sovereignty of 'the people'
Stating a monolithic people: 'the people' is understood/depicted as a homogenous/monolithic construct with common feelings, wishes and opinions
Anti-elitism (vertical differentiation): denouncing, blaming or detaching of the elite
Political elite (e.g. "classe politique", the government, the administration)
Economic elite (e.g. banks, companies, "oligarchs")
Cultural elite (e.g. intellectuals, Universities, artists)
Media (e.g. "Lügenpresse", "Staatsfernsehen")
Supranational or foreign institutions (e.g. the EU or foreign governments)
Other elites or not specified

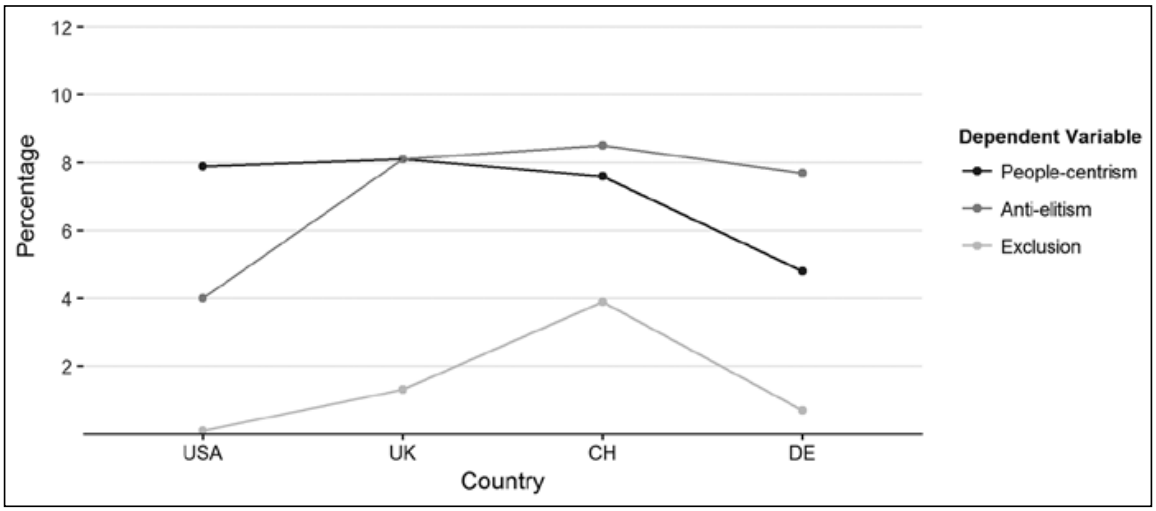
Exclusion (horizontal differentiation): denouncing, blaming or criticizing of specific social groups
Foreigners (e.g. immigrants)
Religious Groups (e.g. muslims, jews)
Other countries or people in other countries (e.g. USA, Germany if not explicitly against the elite)
Other groups or not specified

7. Results

Overall, the findings show that 12.5 percent of all statements contain at least one element of the three populist communication dimensions. People-centrist (7.2%) and anti-elitist (6.8%) statements are almost equally common, whereas exclusion (1.4%) is much less frequent. Thereby, statements containing only one of the three dimensions (9.7%) are most common, followed by statements combining two of the three dimensions (2.6%), while the simultaneous occurrence of all three dimensions is almost absent (0.1%).

To answer our hypotheses, first, we analyze differences in populist communication across the four investigated countries. In this respect, we expect political communication to be more populist in countries with presidential and majoritarian systems and less populist in countries with parliamentary respectively directorial and proportional systems. Looking at the frequencies of statements which include at least one reference to the different dimensions, people-centrism occurs most often in the United Kingdom but closely followed by the United States and Switzerland (see Figure 1). The other two dimensions, anti-elitism and exclusion, occur most often in Switzerland. Swiss politicians tend to most often blame, denounce, or exclude some elite or a specific social group. The frequencies of the three dimensions also reveal that politicians in all countries refer to the people or make anti-elitist statements much more frequently than they exclude certain social groups on the horizontal dimension. Figure 1 compares the country means, which simultaneously correspond to the share of statements that contain at least one reference to the respective populist dimension.

Figure 1. Shares for each dimension by country



Notes: See also Table 3.

To investigate whether these country differences are significant, analyses of variance (ANOVA) are conducted with the maximum indices for people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion as dependent variables (see Table 3)[5]. With regard to people-centrism, there are no significant country differences. However, the countries differ significantly with regard to anti-elitism and exclusion. The United States scores significantly lower than Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom on the anti-elitism index. Exclusion is significantly higher in Switzerland compared to the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States. Other country differences are not statistically significant. This means that, overall, there are no significant country differences with regard to people-centrism, although people-centrist key messages tend to be used more in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Switzerland than in Germany. Anti-establishment or anti-elitism is quite common among the three European countries, but not as much in the United States. The exclusion of immigrants, foreigners, religious, or other social groups is relatively common in Switzerland, but practically irrelevant in the other three countries. These results mostly dispute our assumptions with regard to influences of the system of government and the electoral system on populist communication. As Figure 1 illustrates, levels of people-centrism come closest to the hypothesized pattern with higher shares in the United States and the United Kingdom, followed by Switzerland and lowest in Germany. However, these differences are not statistically significant. Furthermore, the country levels for anti-elitism and exclusion are contrary to the presumed pattern, with the highest shares in Switzerland, followed by the United Kingdom and Germany and the lowest shares in the United States. This refutes our first hypothesis and suggests that other context factors besides the political system are more crucial for the extent of populism in politicians' communication.

Table 3. Country differences with regard to the three dimensions of populist communication

	CH n = 485		DE n = 542		UK n = 670		US n = 757			
	M	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*F*	η^2
People-centrism	0.08	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.08	0.01	2.05	.003
Anti-elitism	0.08[a]	0.01	0.08[a]	0.01	0.08[a]	0.01	0.04[b]	0.01	4.73**	.006
Exclusion	0.04[a]	0.01	0.01[b]	0.01	0.01[b]	0.00	0.00[b]	0.00	10.58***	.013

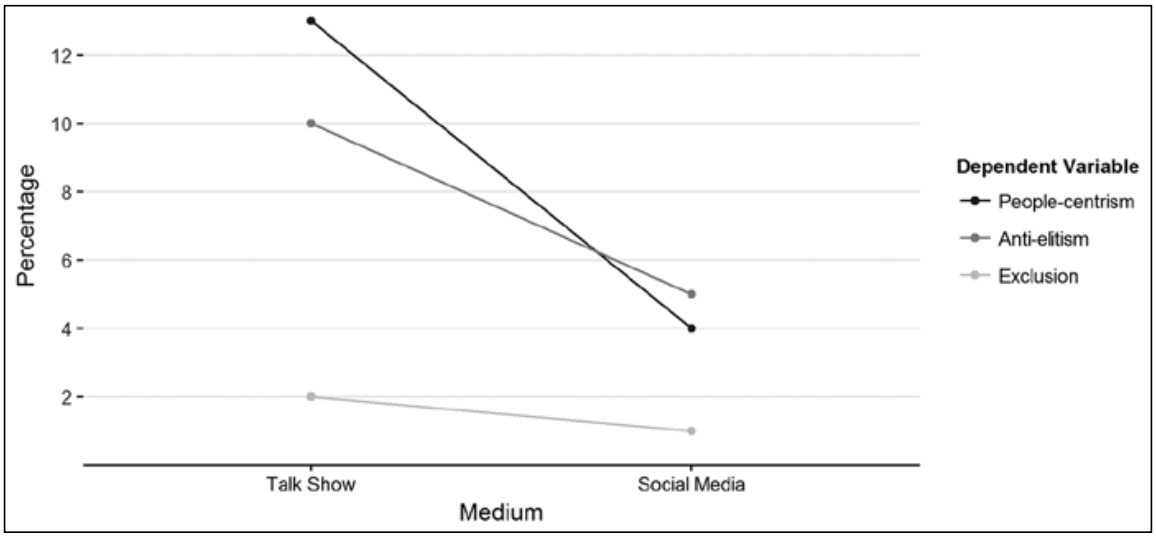
Notes: N = 2454. Single-factor variance analyses (post-hoc test: Games-Howell). **p < .01, ***p < .001. Groups with different identification letters (a, b) are significantly different at the 5% level.

The second hypothesis claims that politicians' communication is on average more populist in talk shows than on social media. Figure 2 shows that the means for all three dimensions are higher for talk shows than social media. Single factor ANOVAs confirm that the levels of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion are

5 Since our dependent variable is a dummy variable, we have verified all results with logistic regressions. However, due to reasons of comprehensibility and illustration, we have decided to focus on the results of the ANOVAs in the paper.

significantly higher in talk shows than on social media (see Table 4). To ensure that these results are not due to a sampling bias, the same calculations are replicated with just the 47 politicians that are actually present on both channels. The significant differences between talk shows and social media can be confirmed for people-centrism ($F(1, 2079) = 94.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .044$) and anti-elitism ($F(1, 2079) = 42.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .020$). For exclusion, however, the difference is not significant with this reduced sample ($F(1, 2079) = 3.52$, *ns*). Overall, these results indicate that the channel through which politicians communicate does indeed have an influence on the level of populist communication. In our analyzed samples, the investigated politicians use more references to the people, a stronger anti-elitist discourse, and a higher exclusion of social groups on talk shows than on Facebook and Twitter, which supports H2.

Figure 2. Shares for each dimension by medium



Notes: See also Table 4.

Table 4. Differences between communication channel with regard to the three dimensions of populist communication

	Talk Show $n = 926$		Social Media $n = 1528$			
	M	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*F*	η^2
People-centrism	0.13	0.01	0.04	0.01	75.57^{***}	.030
Anti-elitism	0.10	0.01	0.05	0.01	28.27^{***}	.011
Exclusion	0.03	0.00	0.01	0.00	13.19^{***}	.005

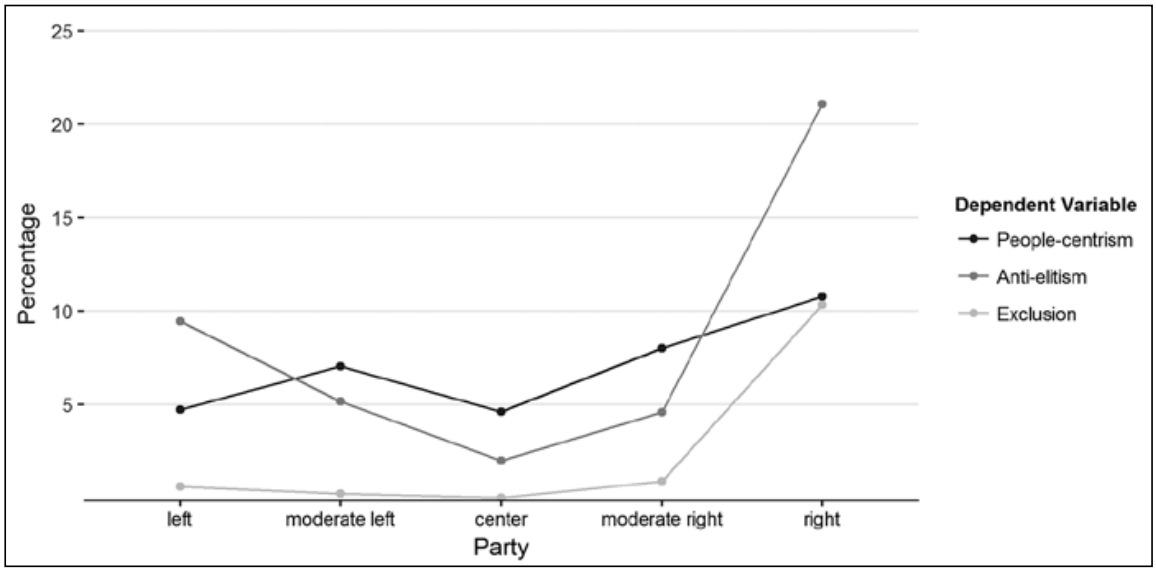
Notes: $N = 2454$. Single-factor variance analyses. $^{***}p < .001$.

To answer H3, politicians are placed on a left to right scale according to their party association based on the Chapel Hill expert survey (CHES) (Bakker et al., 2012; Ladner, 2014; Wagschal & König, 2015). To investigate the differences between pole parties and center respectively moderate parties, a dummy variable is

created for pole party politicians that comprises politicians of the two categories at the extremes of the left-right scale. Single factor ANOVAs for the three sub-dimensions of populism reveal that while there are no significant differences with regard to people-centrism ($F(1, 2452) = 0.01$, *ns*), the mean differences for anti-elitism ($F(1, 2452) = 61.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .025$) and exclusion ($F(1, 2452) = 51.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .020$) are highly significant. Thus, while pole parties' communication is not more people-centrist than center or moderate parties' statements, they employ the two conflictive dimensions associated with populism – anti-elitism and exclusion – more often. H3 is therefore only partially supported.

To further investigate empirical patterns with regard to differences along the political spectrum, Figure 3 plots the mean values of the different party families of the investigated politicians on the left-right scale for the three dimensions. The graph shows that in our sample right-wing politicians have the highest mean values for all three dimensions of populism. However, there is also a clear 'bathtub' shape for the second dimension: not only right-wing, also left-wing politicians score higher on anti-elitism than moderate and center parties. Exclusionist communication, in contrast, is almost only used by right-wing politicians.

Figure 3. Shares by party types on the left-right scale



Notes: See also Table 5.

One-way ANOVAs confirm that party ideology along the left-right scale has a significant effect on people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion (see Table 5). According to post-hoc tests (Games-Howell), however, no party types differ significantly from each other in their level of people-centrism. With regard to the second dimension, right-wing politicians communicate significantly more anti-elitist than politicians of all other parties. Yet, left-wing politicians also show a significantly higher degree of anti-elitism in their communication compared to politicians of center parties and moderate-right parties. With regard to exclusion, right-

wing politicians use significantly more excluding key messages in comparison to all other parties, while no other party types differ significantly.

Table 5. Differences between party types with regard to the three dimensions of populist communication

	Left		Moderate left		Center		Moderate right		Right			
	n = 339		*n* = 952		*n* = 152		*n* = 788		*n* = 223			
	M	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*F*	η^2
People-Centrism	0.05	0.01	0.07	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.08	0.01	0.11	0.02	2.42*	.004
Anti-Elitism	0.09[a]	0.01	0.05[a,b]	0.01	0.02[b]	0.02	0.05[b]	0.01	0.21[c]	0.02	23.65***	.037
Exclusion	0.01[a]	0.01	0.00[a]	0.00	0.00[a]	0.01	0.01[a]	0.00	0.10[b]	0.01	38.41***	.059

Notes: $N = 2454$. Single-factor variance analyses (post-hoc test: Games-Howell). *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$. Groups with different identification letters (a, b, c) are significantly different at the 5% level.

To summarize, these results show that although parties across the political spectrum use populist key messages to some extent, the level of populist communication, or rather the level of its different dimensions, in politicians' statements is in fact dependent on party membership. While politicians on both extremes of the political spectrum exhibit higher levels of anti-elitism, they do not refer to the people more often than other parties do. Furthermore, in our sample, only right-wing party affiliation leads to a more populist communication with regard to all three dimensions, and especially with regard to exclusion.

8. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate populist communication in the self-presentation of politicians and to examine possible contextual variations for different countries, media settings, and party families. In particular, possible differences in the use of populist communication in different non-institutionalized communication arenas of politicians across the political spectrum were of interest. We defined populism as a thin ideology and derived three dimensions of populist communication: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion. These dimensions were looked at separately in order to account for a possibly fragmented form of populism on social media and to investigate differences as well as similarities in their use.

Our hypothesis with regard to the influence of the political system on populist communication is not supported. This implies that formal structures of the political system cannot alone explain differences in the levels of populist communication across countries. Nevertheless, interesting differences are found between the four countries that may rather be explained by cultural, historical, or situational contexts. The levels of anti-elitism and exclusion are highest in Switzerland, followed by the United Kingdom, while people-centrism is highest in the United Kingdom and the United States. Although not all differences are statistically significant, this provides interesting insights.

Populism in Swiss politicians' communication seems to come closest to a *complete* populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). While it is contrary to our expectation that directorial and proportional systems constrain populist communication, the high level of populism in Switzerland is not entirely surprising. Albertazzi (2008) even labeled Switzerland as "another populist paradise." On the one hand, this has to do with the prominent role and success of the right-wing *Swiss People's Party (SVP)*. On the other hand, some features of the Swiss political system that have previously been seen as impediments to the rise of populism may actually provide favorable opportunity structures for populist actors. These include direct democratic instruments and the logic of consociationalism (Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017). In fact, the regular popular votes may promote a permanent populist campaign and, thus, override constraining effects of the directorial and proportional system. This may have been especially relevant since our investigation took place shortly after a widely discussed popular initiative against mass immigration. In addition, the Swiss political culture with its 'militia system', pronounced localism, and Euroscepticism provides fertile ground for populist rhetoric (Albertazzi, 2008). Moreover, in multi-party parliamentarian systems, some parties may also use populist communication to set themselves apart from all the other parties in the competition for attention.

In Britain, the extent of populism in politicians' communication had been expected to be quite high based on previous research. Not only has the United Kingdom seen the rise of the populist right-wing *United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP)* in recent years (Dennison & Goodwin, 2015; Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2014), British mainstream parties have also been known for their populist rhetoric (Fella, 2008). Furthermore, the majoritarian electoral system was expected to promote populist communication. In comparison to Switzerland, horizontal exclusion of specific social groups is, however, much lower. Hence, populist communication in the United Kingdom seems to correspond more closely to *anti-elitist* populism with high levels of people-centrism and anti-elitism but low levels of exclusion (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

The lower levels of populism in Germany confirm the existing literature and our theoretical expectations. Due to restrictive institutional conditions such as Germany's parliamentary system of proportional representation and federal structure, as well as due to the historical burden of the Nazi past, right-wing populism has long remained a peripheral matter in Germany. Left-wing populism has been slightly more successful, yet also to a limited extent (Decker, 2008; Fawzi, Obermaier, & Reinemann, 2017). Horizontal exclusion of specific social groups is indeed very low. Hence, similarly to the United Kingdom, populist communication in Germany seems to match *anti-elitist* populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), although with a lower degree of people-centrism.

Finally, based on our assumptions regarding government and electoral systems, politicians in the United States were expected to have the highest use of populist communication. References to the people are relatively common and strong in the United States. Anti-elitism and exclusion are, however, the lowest among the four countries. Thus, populism in the United States seems to come closest to an *empty populism* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In contradiction to the previous literature,

there may be fewer incentives for populism in two-party systems, because they already have an inherent antagonism between the ruling party and the opposition. Ware (2002, p. 104) also notes that populism in the United States "lacks much of the anti-regime character evident in other countries" and that "'the confrontational element' is often, though not always, muted." However, with the election of Donald Trump and his explicitly divisive rhetoric against the political elite as well as specific social groups a more complete or confrontational populism is also on the rise in the US.

To summarize, while our expectations regarding the influence of the government and electoral system could not be confirmed, there is evidence that different political settings lead to different levels and forms of populist communication. However, other contextual aspects such as the media setting may influence politicians' use of populist communication more directly.

The study demonstrates that the amount of populist communication is dependent on the specific characteristics of different communication channels. In our sample, politicians tend to speak more populist on talk shows than on social media. Aspects of talk shows such as their immediacy, staged informality, and direct interaction with the audience, as well as a strong media logic may provoke a more populist tone. Furthermore, political talk shows often stage conflicts between invited political actors intentionally in order to present both sides of an argument and to provide a lively debate – which might incentivize the politicians to utter populist messages. The present live audience may further foster the potential that politicians directly address the people by using people-centrist key messages. However, the extent of populism may vary greatly from show to show depending on the topic, the actor constellation, and the context. In our sample, one episode of the Swiss talk show *Arena* about a popular initiative on mass immigration, featuring politicians of both left- and right-wing parties, and including members of the audience in the discussion, was found to be especially populist. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings may be limited.

Populist communication was found in the self-presentation of politicians of all party families across all four investigated countries. This confirms the theoretical assumption – as well as findings of earlier studies (Cranmer, 2011; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) – that populist content may be employed by any politician regardless of his or her position along the ideological spectrum, although not necessarily to the same extent. In fact, differences between party families were found with regard to the use of populist communication. Politicians of pole parties are more anti-elitist and excluding but not more people-centrist than moderate or center parties are. It makes sense from a theoretical perspective that pole party politicians are more prone to challenge the current political elite. However, they seem to do so more by attacking the elite instead of by identifying and siding with the people as Jagers and Walgrave (2007) suggested. It could also be shown that although politicians across the political spectrum adopt populist communication from time to time, their ideological position has an influence on which dimensions are used. While people-centrist key messages are distributed most evenly across party families, anti-elitist key messages are applied to a greater extent by pole politicians on both sides, and exclu-

sionist key messages are almost only used by right-wing politicians. This empirically supports the often-made assumption that right-wing populism is more exclusionist than left-wing populism.

This study has certain limitations. From a theoretical perspective, as discussed above, it is disputable whether exclusion is a core aspect of populism. However, we included it as a populist communication dimension, first, because we consider the construction of specific out-groups as inherent in the populist construction of a monolithic people. Second, exclusion is an important feature of current populism trends in Western Europe as well as in the United States. Third, by investigating the three dimensions separately, exclusion (as well as the two other dimensions) is not defined nor empirically tested as a necessary feature of populism. This allows for the comparison of the three dimensions and the identification of different types of populism across contextual settings.

More generally, our sampling strategy may lead to some selection bias with regard to the countries, selected talk shows, politicians, and time frame. Although historically, in the United States and in Germany left-wing populism has been more prevalent (Fawzi et al., 2017; Ware, 2002), mostly right-wing parties or movements have stood out as populist in the analyzed countries in the last few years: the *SVP* (Albertazzi, 2008; Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017), the *Alternative for Germany (AfD)* (Häusler, Teubert, & Roeser, 2013), *UKIP* (Fella, 2008), and the *Tea Party Movement* (Groshek & Engelbert, 2012), among others. This may explain why in our sample populism is highest in the communication of right-wing politicians. While there are individual representatives of left-wing parties such as *Die Linke* in Germany or the *Green Party of England and Wales* included, right-wing politicians are overrepresented in our sample. Thus, we expect that if our study would be expanded to other countries and deliberately include more extreme left-wing parties, populism and especially anti-elitism would also be higher at the left end of the political spectrum.

Another constraint is that only 47 of the 74 politicians in the investigated talk shows were also active on social media. We were able to show that politicians who are present on both channels talk more populist in talk shows than on social media. However, our sampling strategy may exclude politicians who do not have access to the main political talk shows but instead – or maybe as result – are more active and populist on social media. Furthermore, it is possible that politicians who appear in talk shows more often are more populist than the average politician is because their populist rhetoric matches well with media logic. However, we expect this to be similar across countries. Moreover, this would not affect our findings with regard to our second hypothesis. Nevertheless, the dominant role of the right-wing populist *SVP* in Switzerland as the largest party and the consequential high presence of *SVP* politicians in Swiss talk shows may partly explain the high levels of populism in Switzerland.

It also has to be kept in mind that social media messages – especially Tweets – are usually much shorter and condensed than statements in talk shows. Social media posts themselves often do not contain much content. Instead, they may include links to videos, news articles, websites, or other platforms. Thus, it is possible that the text of a Tweet or Facebook post itself is not populist, but the linked

content does contain populist elements. This could not be captured in this investigation, since only the actual content of the posts was coded. Although this study deliberately put the focus solely on direct statements by politicians, it would be interesting for future research to investigate the shared and linked content as well.

Finally, we are looking at a short period of routine time in 2014. The political circumstances in general and specifically with regard to populism have since already changed quite a bit – especially in the United States but also in the other three countries. It would therefore be necessary to investigate how the use of populist communication has changed in the meantime. Another important aspect for future studies would be to investigate the specific role of populist communication in election campaigns – especially since we expect the electoral system to influence the use of populist communication.

To conclude, by taking a communication-centered approach this study shows that populist communication is not applied uniformly in the self-presentation of politicians across four established democracies, media channels, and party affiliation. It reinforces Cranmer's (2011) argument that populist communication is context dependent and demonstrates that political TV talk shows tend to be specifically populist communication arenas.

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D.2 Article II

Populism in Online Election Coverage: Analyzing Populist Statements by Politicians, Journalists, and Readers in Three Countries

Sina Blassnig, Nicole Ernst, Florin Büchel, Sven Engesser, & Frank Esser

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POPULISM IN ONLINE ELECTION COVERAGE

Analyzing populist statements by politicians, journalists, and readers in three countries

Sina Blassnig, Nicole Ernst, Florin Büchel, Sven Engesser, and **Frank Esser**

This article investigates the extent to which populist key messages are distributed via online news articles and reader comments, as well as how media actors, political actors, and readers employ populist online communication during election periods. Populism is defined as a thin ideology, and four dimensions of populist communication are distinguished: people-centrism, anti-elitism, popular sovereignty, and exclusion. We analyze online news articles and reader comments during election campaigns in France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. We find that comment sections are more populist than online news articles and that the majority of populist key messages in online news articles originate from politicians, not from journalists. However, we further show that compared with straight news items, opinion-oriented stories are more prone to conveying populist key messages from media actors, whereas straight news favors populism by political actors. Finally, we investigate how online news media moderate populist key messages disseminated by political actors.

KEYWORDS content analysis; election campaigns; online news; populism; political communication; reader comments

Introduction

From the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States to the apparent electoral defeat of the Front National in the French elections to the entry of the right-wing populist AfD into the German Parliament, populism and its influence on election campaigns has been a major topic in most recent elections in Western democracies. Populism has been described as being "on the rise" (Kriesi 2014, 361), or even as the current "Zeitgeist" (Mudde 2004). To understand political populism in election campaigns, it is essential to understand populist political communication (Stanyer, Salgado, and Strömbäck 2017). Political communication is the central mechanism of election campaigns. The mass media—and increasingly the online news media—play a vital role in mediating and moderating the flow of political communication during election campaigns (e.g. Strömbäck and Kiousis 2014). Online news media not only enable campaign communication by political actors, they also offer ways for readers to actively participate in the news cycle, for example, by commenting on news articles (e.g. Kalogeropoulos et al. 2017).

Although scholarly awareness of the complex relation between populism and the mass media has increased, the area of populist online communication has long been

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neglected (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017). A variety of publications have addressed the importance of online communication in the political process (i.a. Chadwick 2013; Coleman and Blumler 2009) and the role of the internet as a public sphere (i.a. Dahlgren 2005; Gerhards and Schäfer 2010). However, most have either ignored the concept of populism or alluded to it only very briefly. More recently, research has started to examine populist communication specifically in connection with the internet (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017; Krämer 2017) or on social media (Engesser et al. 2016; Ernst et al. 2017; Groshek and Engelbert 2012; Van Kessel and Castelein 2016). However, as far as we know, no studies so far have specifically focused on populism in online news media and attendant user comments. This is rather remarkable because there is much to suggest that online media provide specific opportunity structures for populism (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017; Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017; Krämer 2017). Taking a communication-centered approach to populism (Stanyer, Salgado, and Strömbäck 2017), we therefore address the first overarching question: To what extent are populist key messages distributed via online news articles and reader comments?

Online news media can take on different roles. First, they can voice or propagate populist resentments themselves, a role often referred to by the term media populism (Krämer 2014) or populism *by* the media (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017, 367–369). Second, the media can act as a gatekeeper of populist messages disseminated by other actors—mostly by politicians. The media can neutrally disseminate, strengthen, or legitimize the populist messages of other actors, which can be related to populism *through* the media (369–371). In contrast, journalists can also oppose and criticize populist messages or actors and thus attenuate, delegitimize, or warn against them. Furthermore, online media may open the gates to populist messages created by audience members in the form of reader comments, which has been referred to as *populist citizen journalism* (371). Thus, different actors contribute to the distribution of populist communication in online news media. These considerations lead to the second guiding question: How do media actors, political actors, and readers employ populist key messages during election times?

To address these questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of online news coverage and reader comments on immigration topics during national election campaigns in France (2017), the United Kingdom (2015), and Switzerland (2015). We analyze differences in the use of populist communication between online news articles and comment sections (H1), political actors and media actors (H2), as well as opinion-oriented stories and straight news items (H3). Finally, we investigate how reporters moderate the populist messages of political actors (*RQ1*). Thereby, the three countries serve as a comparison of contexts (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017).

Defining Populism and Populist Communication

Consistent with much recent research on populism and populist communication, we conceive of populism as a *thin* ideology (Abts and Rummens 2007; Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008; Wirth et al. 2016) or as a *set of ideas* (Hawkins 2009; Taggart 2000). At the core of populism lies the normative, moralistic, and Manichean vertical differentiation between two groups: the first is the "corrupt elite," who are out of touch with the second group, "the pure people" (Mudde 2004, 543). Furthermore, populism postulates the empowerment and sovereignty of the people. Finally, these core ideas of populist ideology are dependent on a

monolithic conception of "the people" as a discrete entity, or as a corporate body that is capable of having common interests, common desires, and a common will. This implies that groups who do not share the people's "good" characteristics, values, or opinions are perceived as out-groups or as "dangerous 'others'" (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 3). Thus, populists may exclude specific segments of the population from the group of "true people" and see them as a threat or a burden to society (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). In contrast to the elites, these out-groups exist not above but rather within the people and are, thus, subject to horizontal differentiation.

Following this conceptualization, populist ideology consists of four dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism, popular sovereignty, and the exclusion of others. While the first three elements apply to all ideological variants of populism (Mudde 2004), the fourth element is more closely connected to right-wing populism (which is widespread in France and Switzerland, two of the countries studied here). Based on these theoretical dimensions of populism and the existing literature discussing populist communication (Cranmer 2011; Ernst et al. 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Wirth et al. 2016), 12 populist key messages are derived and assigned to 1 of the 4 dimensions of populism.

The first dimension—people-centrism—consists of four key messages that advocate for the people. A populist actor can demonstrate his closeness to the people, stress their virtues, praise their achievements, or describe them as a monolithic group. The second dimension—anti-elitism—combines three populist key messages that are all conflictive toward the elites. Populist actors discredit or blame the elite and detach the elite from the people. The third dimension of populism—restoring sovereignty—comprises two key messages. On the one hand, populist actors may demand the people's sovereignty. On the other hand, populist actors can also establish a negative and conflictive approach by denying the sovereignty of the elite. Finally, exclusion contains three conflictive key

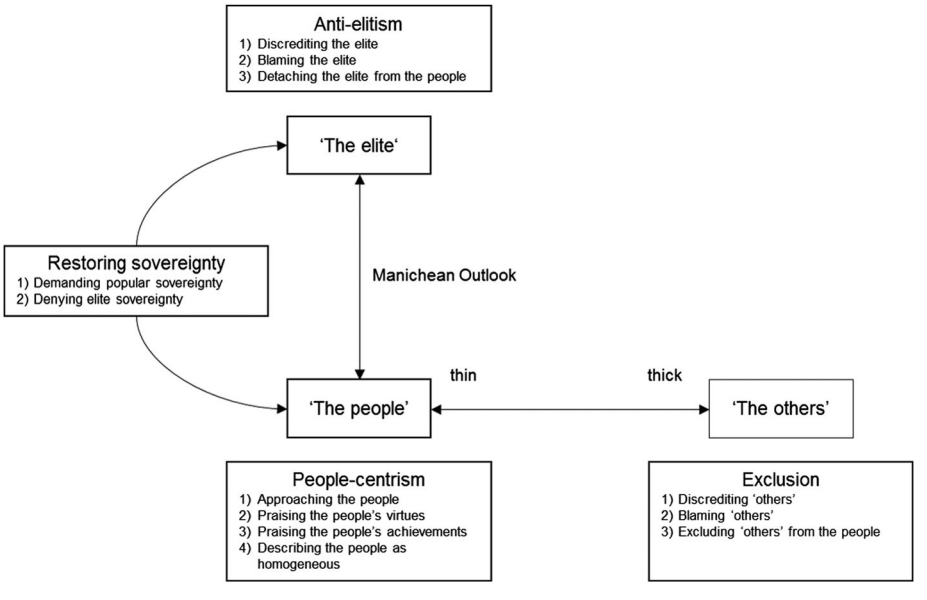

FIGURE 1
Conceptual model of populist communication

messages toward specific social groups. Just as they blame the elite, populist actors may discredit or blame specific social groups or exclude them from the people. Figure 1 visualizes the relations between the four dimensions of populist communication.

Perspectives on Populism and the Media

Like all political actors, populist actors depend largely on the mass media for their communication. In turn, the news media tend to welcome the often dramatic and controversial statements of populist actors, as they lead to attention from a larger audience. Thus, the role of the media is crucial to understanding populist communication as well as the rise and success of recent populist political actors (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017).

Esser, Stępińska and Hopmann (2017) identify three perspectives with regard to populism and the media: populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism. The first perspective, *populism by the media*, "refers to media organizations actively engaging in their own kind of populism" (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017, 367). Thus, the media may themselves construct in- and out-groups, promote hostility against elites, or appeal to moral sentiments (Mazzoleni 2014). Krämer (2014) has a similar notion of media populism as populism propagated by the media themselves. This may be due either to a specific journalistic ideology or to an increasing popularization of news coverage, which promotes certain stylistic elements. The second perspective, *populism through the media*, is focused on the dissemination and strengthening of populist messages by politicians and other actors. In this way, media outlets provide populists with a platform that multiplies and magnifies their messages. This is based on the notion of "media complicity"; the assumption that there is a—usually unintentional—convergence of goals between the "production logic" of commercialized media and that of populist political movements (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017, 369; Mazzoleni 2008, 54–55). This perspective assumes that media logic creates a structure conducive to populist messages and allows for their seamless—and mostly unconscious—integration into editorial considerations and news content (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017). Charismatic, media-savvy leaders, sharp language, and the often taboo-breaking rhetoric of populist actors perfectly fit media logic and news values (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017; Mazzoleni 2008). Populists may, of course, also anticipate and exploit these traits. Thus, intentionally or unintentionally, the media can provide a favorable platform for populism (Mazzoleni 2014). The third perspective introduced by Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann (2017, 371) is *populist citizen journalism*, which "occurs when media organizations open the gates to populist messages by audience members—usually in the form of reader comments on their websites." Comments on online news websites are less constrained than news articles by editorial gatekeeping processes and norms. Hence, while newspapers may formally abstain from populism in their editorial content, they may allow the dissemination of populist rhetoric in their comment sections (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017).

Online News Media as Platforms for Populist Communication

The notion that there is a close relation between populism and online communication was already highlighted in the late 1990s (Bimber 1998). Both the internet and populism have been regarded as potential correctives as well as potential threats to democracy (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017). Recent literature suggests that the internet has

particular functions for populist actors (Krämer 2017) and that online media provide specific opportunity structures for populist communication logic (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017; Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017). With regard to online news, the four characteristics discussed below may foster the potential of populist communication among politicians, journalists, and readers.

First, with regard to ideological aspects, online media provide political as well as media actors with more direct connections to the people, which is consistent with populists' claims to represent, advocate, and speak on behalf of the people (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017). While these connections are often related to social media, the hurdles of journalistic gatekeeping are potentially also lower in online news outlets (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). Moreover, online news facilitates direct feedback from readers in the form of likes, shares, and comments, and it is therefore increasingly driven by readers (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017). Furthermore, online media may provide non-elite actors with better opportunities to enter the news cycle (Chadwick 2013), a situation that is closely related to populists' anti-elitism and their self-presentation as political outsiders.

A second aspect of online communication that may be favorable for populist communication is the attention economy of the internet (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017). This aspect is connected to the above-mentioned assumption that there is compatibility between media logic and populist communication logic. Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann (2017) note three aspects of media logic that are especially favorable to the dissemination of populism: (a) conflict framing, (b) strategic framing, and (c) personalization. Conflictive aspects such as negativity against or distrust of political elites, personalization, or a focus on political strategies have also been associated with interpretative journalism (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2008; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017). Thus, both attention-driven as well as interpretative journalism may be beneficial for populist communication.

As it is mostly commercialized media logic that is seen as favorable for populism, it is thirdly assumed that highly commercialized media, such as commercial broadcasters or mass-market tabloid newspapers, are especially susceptible to the populist messages of political actors (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017; Mazzoleni 2008). This susceptibility may also apply to online news outlets as high click rates, speed, and an increasing focus on audience metrics gain in importance. Thus, while the online outlets of traditional mass media are still dominated by *mass media logic*, they are also influenced by *network media logic* (Klinger and Svensson 2015). This may render online news media more susceptible than traditional print media to populist messages by political or other actors, as network media logic has been described as beneficial for populist communication (Engesser et al. 2016; Ernst et al. 2017).

Finally, this commercialization process may be reinforced by soliciting the active participation of readers via reader comments (Mazzoleni 2014). Commenting on news articles is currently one of the most practiced forms of audience participation on news websites across Western democracies and may significantly influence readers' perceptions of public opinion or even change readers' personal opinions (Lee 2012; Lee and Jang 2010; Toepfl and Piwoni 2015). Depending on the theoretical perspective, comment sections can take on various functions and logics. While earlier research on reader comments has focused on deliberative quality, Freelon (2015) suggests a *liberal individualist* and a *communitarian* perspective. According to the former, user comments serve "the single-minded pursuit of uninhibited self-expression, usually at the expense of civility and responsiveness"

(Freelon 2015, 774). From a communitarian perspective, comment sections foster collaboration with like-minded others to advance ideologically specific goals and disengagement from outsiders (Freelon 2015). Additionally, as Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) suggest, the comment sections of news websites may also act as *counterpublic spaces* (see also Downey and Fenton 2003), where readers promote arguments that challenge a perceived dominant or mainstream public sphere and strengthen a sense of collective identity among counterpublic commenters. Aspects of all three perspectives are reminiscent of the characteristics of populist communication: the liberalist individualist perspective brings to mind populists' emphasis on freedom of expression in opposition to political correctness and taboos (Mudde 2004). Both the communitarian and counterpublic perspectives imply the construction of in- and out-groups, the use of "us" vs. "them" rhetoric (Mudde 2004), and the conception of a people with a closed, collective identity (Abts and Rummens 2007). Furthermore, counterpublic spaces are reminiscent of populist hostility against the establishment, which often includes the mainstream media (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Since hardly any literature focuses explicitly on populism in *online* news so far, we derive our hypotheses and research questions based on the theoretical considerations outlined above as well as existing empirical analyses about populist communication in traditional media.

The theoretically discussed functions of reader comments as liberal individualist, communitarian, or counterpublic spaces may foster populist communication in the form of populist citizen journalism. Furthermore, reader comments are less constrained by editorial gatekeeping processes and norms, and they may be tactically ignored, deleted, or addressed if necessary (Krämer 2017). Thus, it can be expected that the barriers to publication for populist messages are lower in comment sections than for the editorial content of news. This is supported by initial empirical evidence that letters to the editor are more populist than opinion articles in print newspapers (Rooduijn 2014). As reader comments in online news outlets can be published with less personal effort and fewer editorial restrictions than letters to the editor, we expect this difference to be even more pronounced for online news outlets. From these considerations follows the first hypothesis on the *platform level*:

> **H1:** The extent of populist messages is higher in reader comment sections than in news articles.

Interpretative or opinion-oriented journalism (Umbricht and Esser 2014) may be especially prone to populist messages. First, columns and editorials provide a platform for various political actors to voice their opinions in the news media. Second, the media's advocative attitude on behalf of the people, as well as its critical stance toward the political establishment, may be more pronounced in editorials and commentaries (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2008; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017). Thus, opinion-oriented stories may offer more space and freedom for populist messages than do straight news items, where journalistic professional norms such as objectivity apply more strictly. Finally, opinion-oriented stories may be more prone to conflict or strategic framing as well as personalization, which are seen as beneficial for populist communication (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017). This leads to the second hypothesis on the *news item level*:

H2: The extent of populist messages is higher in opinion-oriented stories than in straight news items.

As described above in the distinction between populism by the media and through the media, populist communication in news articles may originate from different sources. While media outlets intentionally construct populist messages themselves rather rarely, they may often provide a stage for political actors, thereby multiplying and amplifying their statements. The ideological aspects of online media, such as providing a closer connection to the people, may of course also foster populism by media actors—especially in online outlets whose owners are politically motivated (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017). However, with regard to the online outlets of more traditional or commercially motivated news media, aspects of media logic and commercialization may be more relevant for the proliferation of populist communication. As described above, this may be especially beneficial to the populist messages of political actors due to their high news value. Thus, we formulate the third hypothesis on the *speaker level*:

H3: The extent of populist messages by political actors is greater than the extent of such messages by media actors.

However, even if populist messages by politicians are cited in news articles, journalists may convey them in different ways. First, they may neutrally disseminate them based on criteria such as newsworthiness, impartiality, or objectivity. Second, they may scrutinize or criticize such messages, for example, in an attempt to expose populism as a threat to democracy or to push back against media criticism by populists (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017). Finally, journalists may also provide a favorable setting for populist messages by supporting, reinforcing, legitimizing them, or by uttering populist messages themselves. As there has not been much empirical research on this, we additionally address this open research question:

RQ1: How do the online news media moderate populist messages by political speakers?

Method

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of online news coverage and reader comments on the issue of immigration in online news outlets during national election campaigns in France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland.

Sample

This article looks at national election periods because, first, they are prototypical events in which political communication cultures and strategies crystallize (Esser and Strömbäck 2012). Second, populism is most likely to manifest itself in the polarized environment of election campaigns (Plasser and Ulram 2003). Therefore, we included only countries that hosted national elections between 2015 and 2017, and focused on France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. All three countries hosted rather successful right-wing populist parties in the last European or national elections. The *Front National* (FN), *UK Independence Party* (UKIP), and *Swiss People's Party* (SVP) all stand for a restrictive migration policy and strong opposition to EU integration, and all three parties are led by divisive but influential leading figures. However, the countries also differ significantly in

their types of political systems and media systems. With regard to political systems, France has a (semi)presidential democracy with a majoritarian electoral system (majority-plurality), the United Kingdom a parliamentary democracy with a majoritarian electoral system (first-past-the-post), and Switzerland has a directorial democracy with proportional representation (Lijphart 1999). With regard to media systems, according to Hallin and Mancini (2004), France has a polarized-pluralist media system, the United Kingdom a liberal system, and Switzerland a democratic-corporatist media system. By focusing on these three Western European countries, this article maximizes the heterogeneity of populist communication approaches as well as of the political and media contexts found in this region. This design allows a comparison of relations or contexts that serves as a robustness check to ascertain whether a relationship holds in various countries (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017).

The study investigates six online news outlets per country, including print-parent, TV-parent, and pure online outlets (see Table 1). For each country, we selected the online outlets of two leading up-market daily newspapers, the dominant mass-market daily paper, and two TV-parent outlets (one public and one private[1]). Furthermore, we included the most important pure online outlet in each country.

The period of investigation spans six weeks before the most recent, regular national elections in the selected countries. For the United Kingdom, these were the national parliamentary elections on May 7, 2015,[2] for Switzerland the national parliamentary elections on October 18, 2015, and for France the presidential elections, with the first round on April 23 and the second round on May 7, 2017. Furthermore, the project focuses on the topic of immigration because this topic seems to have been one of the driving forces of support for populist parties in Western and Northern Europe (Stanyer, Salgado, and Strömbäck 2017). It is particularly vulnerable to right-wing populist rhetoric and poses a particular challenge to responsible media coverage.

All material was sampled using a search string consisting of words related to immigration, translated into the three respective languages. To ensure that only articles on immigration related to domestic politics or the election campaigns were included in the sample, the search strings additionally contained the commonly used abbreviations or labels for four selected parties per country.[3] This article aims to cover a broad political spectrum within the country and to include both presumed populist and non-populist actors. As presumed populist parties, the search string included one social democratic, one nationalistic,

TABLE 1
Online news outlets

		Country		
		Switzerland	**United Kingdom**	**France**
Print-parent	Up-market	Nzz.ch	Telegraph.co.uk	Lefigaro.fr
		Tagesanzeiger.ch	Theguardian.com	Lemonde.fr
	Mass-market	Blick.ch	dailymail.co.uk	Leparisien.fr
TV-parent	Public	Srf.ch	Bbc.co.uk	Info.france2.fr
	Private	–	News.sky.com	Lci.fr
Pure online		Watson.ch	Huffingtonpost.co.uk	tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/rue89

and one separatist party from each country. Additionally, as the "control group" of presumed non-populist parties, the search string also included the respective liberal party as a fourth party.[4]

The sampling process followed a so-called user-based sampling approach. This means that we place the user perspective at the center and incorporate search strategies into the sampling procedure that are common in the everyday practice of the average internet user. To sample the relevant online news material, we used Google to search for the specific news websites, as it is the largest and most popular text-based search engine in the Western world (e.g. Pan et al. 2007) and a widely used news aggregator (Newman et al. 2017). To ensure comparability and replicability, we used the same web browser (Google Chrome) in the "incognito" browsing mode for all searches and disabled the search history. For each news outlet, we then googled the respective search string, restricted the search to the respective news website (site: *website.com*) and the time frame to the selected 6 weeks, and downloaded the first 30 listed news items (the first 3 pages).[5] Finally, for each news article in the sample ($n = 493$), the first 10 reader comments—that is, the first 10 comments, chronologically, that were posted in direct response to the article[6]—were sampled ($n = 2904$). Overall, the sample comprises 493 news articles, of which 358 have at least one comment.

Operationalization and Coding Procedure

Type of story. The distinction between opinion-oriented stories and straight news items was coded on the story level based on the genre of the article. Opinion-oriented stories comprise not only editorials, columns, and commentaries but also interviews, features, and interpretative analyses, whereas straight news items are characterized by a lack of opinionated and interpretive elements (Umbricht and Esser 2014).

Populist key messages. Populist communication is regarded as a formative measure (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, and Roth 2008) based on the 4 dimensions and the corresponding 12 populist key messages described above. The key messages were operationalized as dummy variables based on Cranmer (2011), Jagers and Walgrave (2007), and Wirth et al. (2016). For each category, we coded at the story level whether a given populist key message was present in an article or comment—regardless of the speaker. Additionally, a category can be coded more than once if the speaker or the target of the populist key message changes. As dependent variable, a populism index is calculated, which is present if at least 1 of the 12 populist key messages is used in a story.

Speaker. For each populist key message, we coded whether the speaker is a political actor, a media actor, a citizen, or another actor. A speaker is an actor who is quoted in the story either directly or indirectly. If the journalist herself makes a populist statement, the speaker was coded as a media actor.

Moderation. In the event that there is a populist key message in a story or reader comment, we coded whether the author (i) disseminates the message neutrally, (ii) explicitly attenuates or criticizes the message, (iii) provides a favorable context for the message that helps to support, reinforce, or legitimize it, or (iv) whether the author utters populist key messages himself.

Several steps were taken to ensure inter-coder reliability. First, a team of 10 coders who are proficient in at least two of the three languages (German, English, and French) received an intensive five-day coder training. In a second step, we conducted several pre-tests, based on which some variable descriptions and definitions were revised and discussed in an additional coder training session. In a third and final step, we formally tested the inter-coder reliability based on English-language material (31 online news articles and 30 reader comments, $n = 61$). As reliability measures, we report Fretwurst's (2015a, 2015b) standardized *S-Lotus* as well as Brennan and Prediger's (1981) *Kappa*.[7] Overall, the coding performance of all variable groups achieved satisfactory inter-coder reliability scores. The average *S-Lotus* across all key messages is .84 and the average Brennan and Prediger's *Kappa* is .75. For the two speaker types (political speaker and media speaker), the average *S-Lotus* is .87 and Brennan and Prediger's *Kappa* is .79. Finally, moderation displays an *S-Lotus* of .80, and a Brennan and Prediger's *Kappa* of .82.

Findings

Overall, 65 percent ($n = 319$) of all articles and 34 percent ($n = 991$) of all individual comments contain at least one populist key message. In both, articles and comments, statements related to the anti-elitism dimension are most common, followed by people-centrist and exclusionist statements, while sovereignty is the least frequently used dimension.

H1 predicts that reader comments are more susceptible to populist communication than are news articles. To compare news articles and reader comments as equal units of analysis, we aggregate the comments on the article level. In other words, we compare the news articles with their associated comment sections in terms of their populism content. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that H1 is supported ($F(1, 851) = 57.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .063$). As predicted, the extent of populism is significantly higher in comment sections ($M = .87$, SD = .34) than in online news ($M = .65$, SD = .48). This means that 65 percent of all articles, compared to 87 percent of all comment sections, contain at least one populist statement. A two-way ANOVA, in which we additionally include a country variable, shows that both the main effects of comment sections ($F(1, 851) = 71.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .078$) and the country ($F(1, 851) = 19.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .044$), as well as their interaction, are significant ($F(1, 851) = 11.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .027$). Both factors together explain 14 percent of variance in the populism dummy variable ($R^2 = .14$). Simple effects analysis using marginal means further confirms that comment sections are significantly more populist than news articles across all three countries (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Estimated means of populism index: comparison of country by comment/article

	CH $n = 485$		FR $n = 543$		UK $n = 670$	
	M	**SD**	***M***	**SD**	***M***	**SD**
News articles ($n = 493$)	.43[a]	.49	.68[b]	.47	.81[c]	.40
Comments ($n = 358$)	.87[d]	.34	.84[d]	.37	.94[d]	.24

Notes: $N = 851$. Two-factor variance analysis (*post hoc* test: estimated marginal means (country by platform)). Groups with different identification letters (a, b, c, d) are significantly different at the 0.5 percent level.

Furthermore, while there are no country differences with regard to populism in reader comments, the extent of populism in news articles differs significantly across the three countries (see Table 2). The share of articles with populist key messages is highest in the United Kingdom, followed by France, and lowest in Switzerland. Possible reasons for these differences are elaborated in the discussion. Interestingly, the reactions of readers are almost identical in the three countries: everywhere, election news stories on immigration trigger reactions particularly from those readers who wish to make populist comments (the country shares of "citizen populism" vary in these cases between .84 and .94).

H2 expects the extent of populism to be higher in opinion-oriented stories than in straight news items. Overall, this hypothesis is not supported ($F(1, 493) = 3.14$, $p = .077$). Populism tends to be higher in opinion-oriented stories ($M = .70$, SD = .46) than in straight news items ($M = .62$, SD = .49), but the difference is slightly below generally agreed levels of significance. This can partly be explained by the different types of speakers expressing populist messages. Supporting our hypothesis, populism by *journalists* is significantly higher in opinion-oriented stories ($M = .36$, SD = .48) than in straight news items ($M = .14$, SD = .35) ($F(1, 493) = 33.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$). This tendency can be shown across all three countries, although the difference is not significant in France.[8] In contrast, populism by *political actors* is significantly higher in straight news items ($M = .47$, SD = .50) than in opinion-oriented stories ($M = .38$, SD = .48) ($F(1, 492) = 5.07$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$). Looking at the countries separately, this only holds true for the United Kingdom, while there are no significant differences between opinion-oriented stories and straight news with regard to political actors in Switzerland and France.[9] Thus, H2 can only be confirmed for populist communication by media speakers, while populism by political speakers tends to be higher in straight news items. Formulated differently—and similar across all three countries—while populist messages by political actors clearly dominate in straight news items, opinion-oriented stories contain similar levels for both speaker types (see Figure 2).

The findings for H2 indicate that there is a difference between populist communication by political actors and media actors. This assumption is also the basis for H3, which postulates that the share of articles with populist messages by politicians is higher than the share of articles with populist messages by media actors. A one-sample *t*-test ($t(1, 493) = 7.52$, $p < .001$) comparing the mean difference between the speaker types ($M = .23$, SD = .68) against zero confirms that, in fact, there are more stories with populist key messages by political speakers ($M = .44$, SD = .50) than by media speakers ($M = .21$, SD = .41).[10] Hence, H3 is supported. A look at the inter-country comparison shows that in the United Kingdom, it is mainly statements by *politicians* that lead to high proportions of populism in election news, whereas in France, it is more often statements made by the *journalists* themselves. Switzerland has the lowest proportion of populism in election news (as shown in Table 2) and occupies a middle position with regard to political and media sources.[11]

After evaluating our hypotheses, it is insightful to compare the four dimensions of populist communication across the three speaker types: political actors, media actors, and citizens. The results in Figure 3 underscore that across all three countries, the extent of populism by *citizens* (in comment sections) is higher than the extent of populism by political actors and that populism by media sources occurs least often. Furthermore, Figure 3 shows that for all three speaker types and all three countries, anti-elitism is clearly more common than people-centrism or exclusion. By contrast, demands to restore popular sovereignty occur very rarely. It is also obvious that there is something akin to a transnational

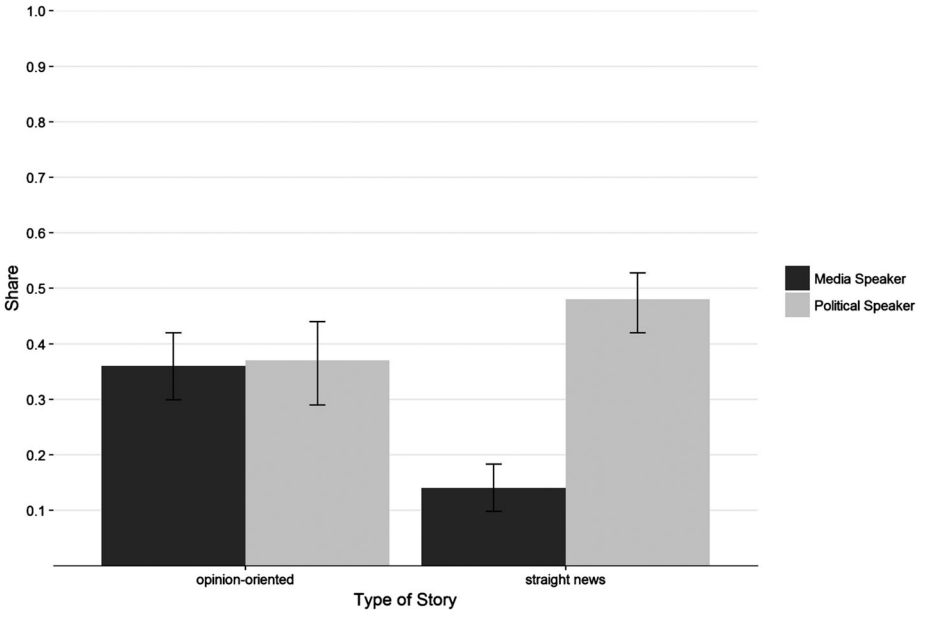

FIGURE 2
Comparison of speakers between opinion-oriented stories and straight news items

agreement among media professionals to hold back any exclusionist rhetoric, whereas citizens are much more inclined to make exclusionist statements in their comments (30 percent in the United Kingdom and roughly 10 percent in France and Switzerland).

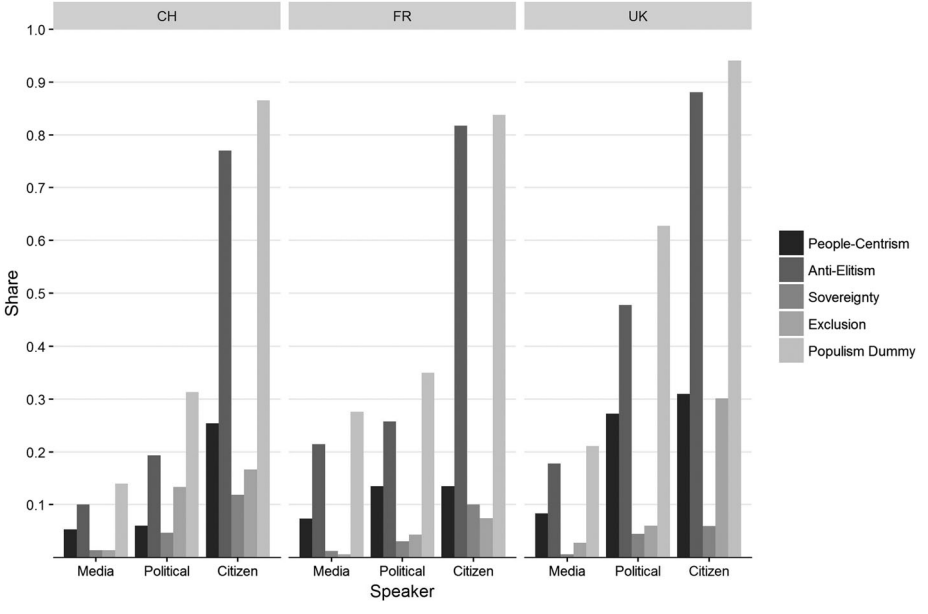

FIGURE 3
Dimensions of populist communication across speakers and countries

Figure 3 presents French journalists as the least restrained—compared to their British or Swiss colleagues—with regard to uttering populist messages themselves; this finding supports our earlier results regarding H3. Finally, British journalists distinguish themselves by being the most generous in granting speaking opportunities to populist politicians.

While across all three countries, the majority of populist key messages in online election news stories consistently originate from political actors, the contribution of journalists remains a fact. As articulated in RQ1, journalists also play an important role as gatekeepers and interpreters of populist messages from other sources. To explore RQ1, we focus only on articles in which journalists have included at least one populist statement by a political actor ($n = 211$). A descriptive analysis indicates that in most cases, journalists disseminate populist statements by political actors neutrally ($n = 186$, 86.9 percent). This means that in these articles, the reporter puts populist messages in a context that is neither explicitly positive nor negative. However, approximately one-tenth of articles containing populist messages by political actors ($n = 24$, 11.2 percent) provide a favorable setting. This may mean that the journalist either explicitly endorses, defends, or legitimizes a populist statement by a politician or that the reporter expresses a populist statement herself. In contrast, journalists in our sample only very rarely explicitly attenuate or openly criticize populist messages by politicians ($n = 4$, 1.9 percent). Again, this pattern can be found similarly across all three countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate, first, the extent to which populist messages are distributed via online news articles and reader comments and, second, how media actors, political actors, and readers employ populist online communication during election campaigns. We show that during election periods in France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland, reader comment sections are more populist than online news articles. Furthermore, the majority of populism in online news articles originates from political actors. However, more than a third of opinion-oriented stories in our sample contain people-centrist, anti-elitist, or exclusionist messages from journalists. Moreover, every 10th article containing populist messages from politicians provides a rather benevolent platform for them, while only 5 percent of articles explicitly criticize such messages. Thus, we provide initial empirical evidence for the distinction of populism *by* the media, *through* the media, and by citizens (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017), as well as evidence of the different roles of these pathways in the dissemination of populist online communication.

Overall, we find populist communication to be quite high in comparison to previous content analyses of populist communication (Engesser et al. 2017; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017), as 65 percent of all articles and 87 percent of all accompanying comment sections in our sample contain at least one populist key message. On the one hand, this may reflect an increase in populism in political communication during the last few years and may provide evidence for a populist "Zeitgeist" (Mudde 2004). On the other hand, these high levels should be interpreted with caution against the background of our sampling strategy, which provides a "burning glass" perspective. This means that we investigate populist communication under most-likely conditions: this study focuses on online media, national election periods, and the topic of immigration, all of which have been described in the literature as favorable opportunity structures for populist communication. Furthermore, we focus on three countries where populist parties have been very successful

recently. However, in this regard, the high levels of populism found here can also be interpreted as empirical evidence that the combination of these contextual factors is highly beneficial for populist communication.

Moreover, there are differences across the four dimensions of populism analyzed here. Across all countries and speakers, anti-elitism is particularly salient, followed by people-centrism. The blaming, discrediting, or exclusion of specific social groups, in contrast, occurs noticeably less often. Key messages proclaiming or defending the people's sovereignty are almost absent. This is in line with earlier research (Ernst et al. 2017; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017) and indicates that it is socially more acceptable to blame powerful elites than powerless societal out-groups such as refugees (Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017). Remarkably, this is different for political actors in Switzerland, who use exclusionist messages more often than people-centrist ones. This may be attributed to the fact that the right-wing populist *Swiss People's Party* has become the country's strongest party since 1999 and, as such, has made immigration restrictions and exclusionist rhetoric socially acceptable (Ernst, Engesser, and Esser 2017).

As one of the first studies of this topic, this article provides empirical evidence for the phenomenon of populist citizen journalism in the form of reader comments. We demonstrate that, in fact, reader comment sections are more prone to populist communication than are news articles. Reader comments not only blame or discredit the elite more often; they also contain more people-centrist and exclusionist messages. Especially with regard to the exclusion of specific social groups, these higher levels may be due to lower barriers and editorial control, which allow controversial, uncivil, or even racist comments. Overall, our findings indicate that citizens may substantially contribute to the dissemination of populist messages on online news platforms and provide fertile ground for people-centrist, anti-elitist, and exclusionist messages by politicians or journalists in articles.

With regard to the relationship between online media and populism, our study provides further empirical evidence for the distinction between populism *by* the media and populism *through* the media (Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann 2017). Our results show that while populism in straight news mainly originates from political actors, journalists are more populist in opinion-oriented formats such as columns, editorials, or commentaries. Thus, populism *by* the media is mainly constrained to opinion-oriented stories, while populism *through* the media is also widespread in straight news. These findings assert that these are two different aspects of populism in online news that need to be distinguished.

The results also confirm theoretical assumptions and earlier empirical findings (Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017) that populism *by* the media is less common than populism *through* the media. As our results show, the majority of populism in online news results from the dissemination of populist messages by political actors. As discussed theoretically, this may be fostered by the attention economy, the increased commercialization of the media, as well as the mix of mass media logic and network media logic found in online news. Populist messages are often controversial and of high news value, which promises high click rates and a high resonance in comment sections or on social media platforms. This may be especially pronounced during election campaigns, when the news media specifically focus on parties and politicians. Thus, while journalists are less likely to voice populist statements themselves, they are highly willing to disseminate such messages voiced by political actors.

This leads to the question of how journalists treat populist messages voiced by politicians. On the one hand, they act as gatekeepers who decide which statements to include

in an article. On the other hand, they also act as interpreters by moderating, discussing, or commenting on populist statements. However, in our sample, the majority of articles provide a mostly impartial platform for populist messages by distributing them without any explicit attenuation or amplification by the author. This indicates that populism through the media should not be dismissed as less relevant than populism by the media. However, our operationalization only includes explicit moderation by journalists themselves. More often, journalists may provide implicit criticism by quoting opportune sources. Furthermore, we only assess moderation at the story level and not for each populist statement individually. Therefore, further research is needed that investigates how journalists moderate populist statements in a more fine-grained manner. Nevertheless, our study provides initial evidence that online news media rarely explicitly condemn or criticize populism by political actors during election times.

Overall, these findings can be mostly corroborated across the three investigated countries. However, some country differences need to be addressed. Most notably, populist key messages are overall more prominent in British newspapers than in France or Switzerland. As we show, this is mostly due to populist statements by political actors that are cited in British news, whereas in France populist key messages by journalists are more common than in the other two countries. The reasons for these different shares of populism in online news may be found in the national campaign context, national media system context, or in more situational factors such as a higher salience of immigration topics in the United Kingdom (Dalmus, Hänggli, and Bernhard 2017) and a strong issue ownership of this topic by *UKIP* (Dennison and Goodwin 2015). However, the differences may also be due to the sample of news outlets, as *The Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* have a greater proximity to populist parties (mostly *UKIP*) than the selected newspapers in France and Switzerland.

This study has some additional limitations that must be considered. Our sample is constrained to election campaigns as well as to the topic of immigration. As discussed above, these selection criteria are based on theoretical considerations. However, it would be interesting to investigate whether our findings hold true for routine periods or other topics. Moreover, our study is limited to three countries. While France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland provide fruitful cases as well as a certain range of different contextual factors with which to test our hypotheses, the findings are based on a limited sample from which generalizations can only be drawn with care. Furthermore, the countries under investigation are mostly known for right-wing populism (although we also examine left-wing and centrist parties in each country). In sum, we call upon future researchers to compare election times to routine periods and to consider countries with strong left-wing populist parties.

In conclusion, this article advances research on populist communication in several ways: First, it answers calls in the literature to analyze the role of *online* populism by specifically focusing on online news platforms and reader comments. Second, it corroborates—across three countries—that reader comments play a crucial role in the dissemination of populist online communication. Third, it reveals differences in the use of populist online communication by political and media actors and, thus, contributes to the distinction between populism by the media and through the media. Finally, it indicates that the majority of populism in online news on the topic of immigration stems from political sources and that journalists rarely mitigate or criticize these statements. The next steps for future research would be, on the one hand, to investigate in more detail how journalists moderate politicians' populist messages, and, on the other hand, to investigate whether populism in reader comments is influenced by characteristics of the article or other context factors.

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NOTES

1. In Switzerland, private broadcasters exist only at the regional and local levels. Furthermore, the existing ones do not publish news on their websites. For lack of a functional equivalent, we therefore decided not to sample this category for Switzerland.
2. The United Kingdom held an additional election in 2017. However, since this was not a regular fixed-term election but set between the usual five-year intervals, we chose the 2015 election for reasons of comparability.
3. Switzerland: *Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP), Lega dei Ticinesi (Lega), and Freisinnig-Demokratische Partei (FDP)*; United Kingdom: *Labour, Scottish National Party (SNP), Liberal Democrats (LibDems);* France: *Front National (FN), Parti Socialiste (PS), Corsica Libera, and Parti Liberal Démocrate (PLD)*. The party lists are only used for the sampling procedure. In the analysis, populist statements are incorporated regardless of who their speaker is.
4. The search strings for the three different countries were as follows:
   Switzerland: migration OR immigration OR zuwanderung OR flüchtling OR ausländer OR asyl OR einbürgerung OR ausschaffung "SVP" OR "SP" OR "Lega" OR "FDP"
   United Kingdom: migration OR immigration OR refugee OR foreigner OR asylum OR naturalisation OR deportation Labour OR "Scottish National Party" OR SNP OR "Liberal Democrats" OR "Lib Dems"
   France: migration OR immigration OR réfugié OR étranger OR asile OR naturalisation OR expuls OR reconduite "Front National" OR "FN" OR "Parti socialiste" OR "PS" OR "Corsica Libera" OR "Parti libéral démocrate" OR "PLD"
5. According to earlier research (e.g. Spink and Jansen 2005), the majority of search engine users will only review search results on the first three result pages (assuming there are 10 search results per page by default).
6. For some news outlets, it was not possible to change the order of the reader comments. In these outlets (*Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Le Parisien*, *Rue89*, *Blick*, *SRF*, and *Watson*), the 10 newest reader comments were selected for the sample.
7. While the unstandardized *Lotus* can be directly interpreted and represents the percentage agreement of coders with the category most used by all coders, the standardized *Lotus* is a chance-corrected version that also takes the number of categories used by coders into account (Fretwurst 2015a, 2015b). For a good summary of *Lotus*'s advantages and an example of its application for international comparative content analysis, see also Hopmann, Esser, and de Vreese (2016). Furthermore, Brennan and Prediger's (1981) *Kappa* is more robust in assessing reliability of rare categories—as is the case with populist key messages—than Krippendorff's alpha and Cohen's kappa (see Quarfoot and Levine 2016).

8. The mean difference in populist messages from media speakers between opinion-oriented stories and straight news in the United Kingdom is .38 ($p < .001$), in Switzerland .16 ($p < .05$), and in France .10 (n.s.).
9. British straight news contains more populist messages by politicians than do British opinion-oriented stories, with a mean difference of .33 (indicating a surplus of populist messages by politicians in straight news), while the mean differences for France (−.05) and Switzerland (−.02) indicate that there are no differences between story types.
10. Since an article can contain populist messages from both political and media speakers, an ANOVA could not be conducted to evaluate this hypothesis. Therefore, a one-sample *t*-test comparing the mean difference between the share of political and media speakers to zero was calculated instead.
11. The mean difference between populist messages from political and media speakers in the United Kingdom is .42 (indicating a considerable surplus of politics-induced populism in news articles), whereas in France, the mean difference is just .07 (indicating the lack of any such surplus). The mean difference for Switzerland is .17.

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D.3 Article III

Populism and Social Media Popularity: How Populist Communication Benefits Political Leaders on Facebook and Twitter

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7

Populism and social media popularity

How populist communication benefits political leaders on Facebook and Twitter

Sina Blassnig, Nicole Ernst, Sven Engesser, and Frank Esser

Abstract

Research has shown that social media is a particularly well-suited channel for distributing populist messages. However, the literature has yet to examine the kinds of reactions that populist messages trigger in social media and whether populist leaders garner more online support than political leaders who do not promote populist views or communicate in a populist manner. This chapter addresses these questions. This chapter defines populist communication, reviews recent research findings, and describes the results of an analysis of Facebook posts and tweets of 36 political leaders in six countries.

"Without the tweets, I wouldn't be here," Donald Trump told *Financial Times* journalists in the Oval Office on April 2, 2017. Claiming over 100 million Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram followers, he added, "I don't have to go to the fake media."

President Trump's open disdain for the established, traditional news media has been a recurring theme in his prolific social media output. Commentators readily label him a populist. But what exactly defines political leaders and parties as populist? And how is it that social media seem to have dealt them such a good hand?

Research has shown that social media is a particularly well-suited channel for distributing populist messages (Ernst et al. 2017; Groshek and Engelbert 2012; Stier et al. 2017). But do populist actors also garner more support on the internet than politicians who do not represent populist views or communicate in a populist way? If so, what will the political landscape look like if typically non-populist politicians compete by sending populist messages on social media?

In this chapter we address these questions. We set out a definition of populism that now has wide currency in the academic world. We describe a framework that allows populism to be measured in social media messages, and we review recent research. We describe what we learned when we analyzed the tweets and Facebook posts of 36 diverse political leaders in six countries over a three-month period. Finally, we consider the potential impact of populism on liberal democracies in the new-media world.

What is populism?

For decades, populism was viewed as a "notoriously vague term" (Canovan 1999). It has been variously defined as an ideology, a political strategy, a style, or a discourse (Hawkins 2010; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2004; Weyland 2017).

However, in the last few years scholars have increasingly come to a consensus in regarding populism as a "thin ideology" (Abts and Rummens 2007; Mudde 2004; Stanley

2008; Taggart 2000), as politicians can combine it with different ideological positions from the left to the right.

This thin populist ideology assumes a simplistic dichotomy between the pure, good people and a corrupt, aloof elite; and it demands that politics should be an expression of the unrestrained popular will. Populists present themselves as the only true representatives of the supposedly unheard public interests. Their ideology has three core dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and restoring sovereignty (e.g., Mény and Surel 2002).

What is populist communication?

How do we tell how populist someone is? Here we follow a "communication-centered approach" (Stanyer, Salgado, and Strömbäck 2017). This means that we study political leaders across the political spectrum and infer how populist each of them is, based on how often he or she uses a set of populist key messages. Building on the existing literature (Bos, van der Brug, and Vreese 2011; Cranmer 2011; Jagers and Walgrave 2007), nine populist key messages have been defined that can be assigned to the three core dimensions of populism (Wirth et al. 2016). Listed below, these key messages in political leaders' statements are seen as expressions of populist ideology (Ernst et al. 2017).

People-centrism, the first dimension, contains four key messages that advocate for the people. A politician can demonstrate that he or she is close to the people, stress their virtues, praise their achievements, or describe them as a homogenous group.

Anti-elitism, the second dimension, combines three hostile key messages towards the elite: discrediting them, blaming them, or emphasizing their detachment from the people.

Restoring sovereignty, the third dimension, is characterized by two key messages: advocating for the people's sovereignty, or denying that of the elite.

Populist political leaders on social media

Social media play a major role in the way all political leaders come across in a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017). But, according to recent research, social media can particularly assist populist leaders or communication (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017; Ernst et al. 2017).

Why is this? Firstly, politicians can communicate directly with the people, bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as journalists. Secondly, social media allow them to engage more closely with their followers and to come over as highly approachable. Thirdly, they can adopt a more personalized and emotionalized approach: they can share photos of their personal life and offer a look behind the scenes (see also Remillard in this volume on Trudeau's personalized use of Instagram). Finally, social media make it easier for political leaders to connect with specific target groups, like-minded people, or "kindred souls" (Jacobs and Spierings 2016) who share their political ideology. This, for example, lets populists use harsh words to attack a common enemy without being subjected to criticism from political opponents or critical observers (Engesser et al. 2017).

Despite these close theoretical connections, researchers have only recently started to examine populism with regard to social media. Most studies up to now focus on politicians who are already identified as populists. This is what Stanyer, Salgado, and Strömbäck (2017) call an "actor-centered approach." An early study by Groshek and Engelbert (2012) showed that leaders of the Dutch Party for Freedom and the US Tea Party Patriots (TPP) used social media for the typical populist strategy of "double differentiation" (Kriesi 2014). This means that they simultaneously distanced themselves from the political establishment as well as from extremist groups.

In a similar vein, Van Kessel and Castelein (2016) concluded that Dutch populist leaders used Twitter as an adversarial tool of opposition. Focusing on populist leaders in Latin America, Waisbord and Amado (2017) found that Twitter had not led to more dialogue between presidents and the public. Instead, they used the platform strategically to influence the news and public agenda. Like Dutch and American populist leaders, Latin American

presidents also used Twitter to attack elites, and specifically journalists and the traditional news media. Other actor-centered studies have investigated who follows or supports populists on social media. Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler (2011) and Heiss and Matthes (2017) came to similar conclusions that the average online supporter of populist politicians or parties was male and less educated. He displayed low levels of political trust but was highly motivated to participate in political discussions or activities.

Communication-centered studies that examine how a broad range of politicians use specific populist communication elements on social media are less common so far. Two earlier studies by ourselves (Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2017) reinforce the assumption that social media are particularly well suited to spread populist ideology. They also show that the different elements of populist communication are communicated in a rather fragmented way on Facebook and Twitter. Politicians from extreme parties (both right-wing and left-wing) and opposition parties use more populist key messages. Furthermore, populist communication is more common on Facebook than on Twitter.

While we focused on the content of populist key messages, Bracciale and Martella (2017) analyzed the populist communication style of Italian political leaders. They showed that a specific style was linked to populist content. This mostly reflected the leader's political communication style and was less influenced by the political divide between left and right. This led to different combinations or nuances of populist styles.

Finally, there are studies that have investigated how populist communication on social media affects the populist attitudes of citizens (Hameleers and Schmuck 2017); or how citizens perceive populists' profiles and messages on social media (Enli and Rosenberg 2018). Interestingly, populist politicians come across as more authentic on social media than traditional politicians do, according to the study by Enli and Rosenberg (2018). Overall, the summarized studies support the theoretical assumptions that populists, as well as populist communication, have an affinity with social media.

Populism and social media popularity cues

While populism seems very compatible with social media, it is less well understood how populist communication affects the popularity or reach of social media messages.

Social media work to a distinctly different logic from that of traditional mass media (Klinger and Svensson 2015; Mills 2012). When users like or share politicians' tweets or Facebook posts, they help them to reach a wider audience beyond their direct followers and friends. This can be related to Vaccari and Valeriani's (2015) distinction between a primary and a secondary audience as well as to the model of a two-step flow of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Additionally, popularity on social media may win politicians more attention in traditional news media (Fürst and Oehmer 2018; Chadwick 2017). Consequently, political leaders have an incentive to post or tweet messages that they expect to elicit a lot of likes and shares.

In this chapter, following Porten-Cheé et al. (2018), we refer to user reactions such as likes, shares, favorites, and retweets as popularity cues, and interpret them as indicators of attention, relevance, or endorsement of social media messages. As such, we expect that specific characteristics of a message such as, for example, the occurrence of populist key messages, may have a positive influence on the number of likes and shares a Facebook post or tweet gets.

In general, there is not much research yet on which aspects of politicians' communication lead to higher numbers of popularity cues. However, amid a growing body of research on populism and social media, Bobba (2018) has conducted one of the few such studies. Examining the Facebook activity of Italy's populist Lega Nord and its leader, Matteo Salvini, Bobba's findings suggest that populist Facebook posts receive more likes than non-populist posts. Focusing on Switzerland, Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw (2018) concluded that how successful politicians were on social media depended on their personal background, political activity, and media coverage, as well as their followership and the

platform. Focusing on characteristics of individual messages, two studies by Bene (2017a, 2017b), based on Hungarian election campaigns, found that emotionally negative Facebook posts received more likes. A study by Heiss, Schmuck, and Matthes (2018) in Austria also found that negative content and emotional language increased user reactions, but positive emotional expressions had a stronger impact on user engagement than negative ones.

Testing the theory: our own study

From here on in this chapter, we build on these initial studies and try to expand their findings by investigating the relationship between populist communication and popularity cues across different social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook), a wide spectrum of politicians, and several countries.

There are various reasons to expect that populist key messages could engender more popularity cues. Firstly, populism can motivate marginalized social groups to participate in political action (Jansen 2011). This could especially apply to social media popularity cues: liking or sharing a political message requires little resource or effort. Secondly, populism is often attributed a high news value or a high compatibility with the logic of news media (Mazzoleni 2008). As Trilling, Tolochko, and Burscher (2016) show, what renders a message newsworthy may also contribute to its social media shareworthiness. Thirdly, the studies described above empirically support the theory that populist content, or communication styles often associated with populism (emotionalization, negativity, and personalization), make Facebook posts more likely to be shared, liked, or commented on. Hence, we expect political leaders to receive higher numbers of popularity cues when they communicate populist key messages.

While we expect to find similar effects across the countries we study, we anticipate differences between social media platforms and different types of politicians. Firstly, we expect that populist communication would have a stronger positive effect on popularity cues

on Facebook than on Twitter. The two platforms have different user demographics and serve different purposes for political leaders' communication. Furthermore, results of our earlier study (Ernst et al. 2017) indicated that politicians' Facebook content is more populist than that of their tweets. Secondly, we expect that leaders of political parties that are typically labeled as "populist" in the scientific literature would be more successful on social media and that they could also profit more from communicating populist key messages. We expect that politicians typically known as "populist" – for example, Nigel Farage or Marine Le Pen – also communicate in a more populist way on social media. Likewise, we assume that their followers or supporters on Facebook and Twitter also have more populist attitudes and therefore may be more inclined to like or share populist posts or tweets (Müller et al. 2017).

How we did it: method and data

To investigate the research questions and formulated expectations, we analyzed the content of Facebook posts and tweets by 36 political leaders from six countries – Switzerland (CH), Germany (DE), the United States (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Italy (IT), and France (FR) – during three politically routine months from September to November 2015 without any election campaigns.[1]

For each country, we selected the leaders of the four largest parties in parliament across the left–right spectrum that could be assigned to the following categories: social democratic, economic liberal, conservative/Christian democratic, and green, as well as those of the most influential party commonly classified as populist in the scientific literature.[2] We defined political leaders as the politicians who held the highest position in the party hierarchy and/or country (party leader and/or head of government) in 2015. Based on these criteria, we investigated the verified Facebook and Twitter profiles of 36 political leaders. Our sample included political leaders of six parties that we identified as typically populist beforehand: Toni Brunner, Swiss People's Party (SVP/CH); Frauke Petry, Alternative for Germany (AfD/

DE); Marine Le Pen, Front National (FN/FR); Beppe Grillo, Five Star Movement (5S/IT); Nigel Farage, UK Independence Party (UKIP/UK); and Sarah Palin, Tea Party Patriots (TPP/USA).

We used Facepager (Jünger and Keyling 2013) to download all Facebook posts and tweets, including the number of popularity cues. We coded only tweets and Facebook posts in which a politician made an explicit statement on an issue or a target actor. The final sample included 345 Facebook posts and 221 tweets (N = 566).

Our dependent variable – social media popularity cues – was measured as the sum of likes and shares on Facebook, and the sum of favorites and retweets on Twitter. Additionally, we coded whether a social media message contained populist communication based on the nine key messages described above. For each populist key message, we coded whether it was present in a social media statement or not. The nine populist key messages were operationalized using a broad range of categories that are rooted in theory and build on existing empirical studies. (For more details, see Ernst et al. 2017 and Wirth et al. 2016.)

The material was coded by a team of intensively trained student coders, which reached acceptable levels of reliability. The average Brennan and Prediger's kappa across all populist key messages is .83. For a more detailed description of the methodological approach, see our previous study: Ernst et al. (2017).

Table 7.1 shows how the data were calculated, alongside a detailed account of the method and statistical analysis.

In brief, for each tweet and Facebook post, we counted popularity cues: Facebook likes and shares, and Twitter favorites and retweets. We also calculated whether at least one of the nine populist key messages was present in any post/tweet, and what proportion of tweets/posts per politician contained at least one populist message. We differentiated male from female politicians. We also took account of whether each subject's party was in government or opposition; and whether the party was typically classified as populist. We

additionally took into account the general profile reach, counting how many Facebook page likes or Twitter followers a politician had.

What we found

Political leaders in our sample received on average 2,649 popularity cues in response to each social media post. However, the numbers varied considerably. Most posts got few user reactions, while a small number got an exceptionally large response. Twenty-two posts were not liked, shared, favorited, or retweeted at all, whereas the most successful Facebook post in our sample was liked or shared 99,688 times in total.

There were also notable differences between the two platforms and the different types of popularity cues. Facebook posts prompted many more popularity cues (4,108 on average) than tweets (373 on average). On both platforms, users more often endorsed a message by liking or favoriting it than recirculated it by sharing or retweeting it (Facebook posts received on average 3,550 likes and 557 shares; tweets received on average 223 favorites and 150 retweets).

To test our expectations regarding the use of populist key messages and its combination with the platform and populist leaders, we calculated negative binomial regression models.[3] These models particularly fit the distribution of the dependent variable and allow the investigation of different effects and interactions while controlling for additional influences such as country differences, gender, party incumbency, and profile reach.

Firstly, we looked at the effect that populist communication has on popularity cues, regardless of the platform and the nature of the politician. Contrary to our expectations, an individual social media post with a populist key message did not receive significantly more popularity cues than a non-populist message (see Table 7.1, Model 1, line A).

However, we did find a significant influence from populist communication on the aggregated politician level (see Table 7.1, Model 1, line B). This means that the more often political leaders posted populist key messages, the more popularity cues their tweets or Facebook posts received. Thus, for followers it may matter more how populist a political leader's communication is overall than whether an individual message is populist. If a political leader regularly posts or tweets populist key messages, this may have a spillover effect on his or her non-populist posts.

Secondly, we examined the role of the social media platform. The regression models confirm that Facebook posts got significantly more popularity cues than tweets (see Table 7.1, Model 1 & 2, line C). And populist key messages were more successful on Facebook than on Twitter. According to the model, populist Facebook posts received 5.5 times more popularity cues than non-populist Facebook posts (see Table 7.1, Model 2, line E).

On Twitter, on the other hand, communicating populist key messages seemed to have the opposite effect. Political leaders actually got fewer popularity cues in response to populist tweets. Using populist key messages in a tweet led to only 30% of the popularity cues that a non-populist tweet would expect (see Table 7.1, Model 2, line A). This is rather surprising but may be explained by the characteristics of these two different platforms, and we discuss this more below.

Finally, we compared typically populist leaders with typically non-populist leaders. Overall, regardless of whether an individual post contained populist key messages, leaders of typically populist parties seemed to be more successful on both Facebook and Twitter than leaders of other parties. This means that social media posts by populist leaders were significantly more liked, shared, favorited, or retweeted than posts by non-populist leaders (see Table 7.1, Model 1 & 2, line D). This is in line with our expectations that being a populist may have a positive influence on political leaders' popularity and reach on social media.

However, contrary to our expectations, populist leaders did not profit more from posting populist key messages than non-populist leaders (see Table 7.1, Model 2, line F). Social media posts by political leaders of populist parties were overall more popular, regardless of whether the individual message was considered populist or not.

Looking back to our theoretical considerations (above), we expected that populist key messages would lead to more popularity cues and that this effect would be more pronounced on Facebook and for populist leaders. These expectations can only partly be supported by our analysis.

To summarize our findings: while populist posts received more popularity cues on Facebook, this was not the case for Twitter. However, messages by political leaders whose average communication was more populist did get higher popularity or reach on both platforms. The same was true for leaders of typically populist parties. Moreover, typically "populist" and "non-populist" political leaders alike received more popularity cues on Facebook when their posts included populist key messages.

As an aside, it is interesting to note how news media journalists may lend politicians enormous extra reach by republishing their social media posts. Two cases from our study illustrate this phenomenon.

Firstly, Nigel Farage, while leader of UKIP, posted the following message both on Facebook and on Twitter on October 12, 2015:

> It is not patriotic to give away control of our country to overseas bureaucrats, it is a surrender.

This statement carries an anti-elitist message against supranational institutions as well as a demand for the country's (and implicitly the people's) sovereignty. The post received relatively high popularity cues on Facebook, being liked by 3,397 followers and shared 654 times. On Twitter, the same message got only 398 favorites and 491 retweets. This is despite the fact that Mr. Farage then had more than twice as many followers on Twitter as on

Facebook. Even more interestingly, the British tabloid newspaper Daily Mail cited this message on the same day that Mr. Farage had posted it on social media.

We found a similar example with Marine Le Pen, leader of Front National.[4] On September 30, 2015, she sent out the following statement, again both on Facebook and Twitter:

> Reduction of APL [housing assistance] to fund the reception of migrants: the foreign preference of the government in action! [Réduction des APL pour financer l'accueil des migrants: la préférence étrangère du gouvernement en action!]

Her anti-elitist populist message, this time against the national government, received even higher numbers of popularity cues on Facebook with 16,442 likes and 10,881 shares (but only 156 favorites and 366 retweets on Twitter). Again, it was picked up by the news media on the same day when the French edition of the Huffington Post published her tweet.

Thus, although earlier research suggests that, overall, only a small share of social media posts actually contain populist key messages (Ernst et al. 2017), they may garner disproportionate attention and reach, both directly on social media and indirectly through traditional news media.

Table 7.1 Factors influencing the number of popularity cues a post receives. (Predictions based on negative binomial regression [N = 566])

		Popularity cues			
		Model 1		Model 2	
		Incidence rate ratios (IRRs)	Confidence interval	Incidence rate ratios (IRRs)	Confidence interval
	(Intercept)	1.19	[0.69, 2.06]	1.21	[0.71, 2.09]
	Controls				
	Gender (male)	1.37	[0.93, 2.01]	1.32	[0.91, 1.93]
	Party incumbency	2.90***	[2.01, 4.19]	3.12***	[2.17, 4.49]
	Profile reach	1.00***	[1.00, 1.00]	1.00***	[1.00, 1.00]
	Country (Switzerland was set as baseline category)				
	Germany	25.08***	[13.19, 47.69]	25.93***	[13.55, 49.61]
	United Kingdom	26.78***	[15.56, 46.10]	24.84***	[14.57, 42.33]
	United States	25.30***	[13.85, 46.22]	23.10***	[13.00, 41.03]
	Italy	45.96***	[27.12, 77.90]	46.03***	[27.25, 77.76]
	France	14.28***	[7.84, 26.04]	13.20***	[7.30, 23.85]
	Independent variables				
A	Populism index	1.27	[0.80, 2.00]	0.31**	[0.151, 0.650]
B	Populism index (aggregated)	580.07***	[34.83, 9662.09]	1111.03***	[65.01, 18989.31]
C	Facebook	14.74***	[10.97, 19.81]	13.00***	[9.59, 17.61]
D	Populist leader	5.36***	[3.54, 8.12]	5.57***	[3.64, 8.53]
E	Facebook*populism index			5.52***	[2.43, 12.52]
F	Populist leader*populism index			1.28	[0.50, 3.25]
	Akaike information criterion (AIC)	8399.255		8391.380	
	Log likelihood	−44185.63		−4179.194	
	Omnibus-test	504.385*** (df = 12)		517.252*** (df = 14)	

Note: IRRs with confidence intervals in brackets. Values < 1 indicate a negative effect; values > 1 indicate a positive effect. ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Table 7.1 displays the regression models. For the calculations, we used a populism index as independent variable, which was present if a Facebook post or tweet contained at least one of the nine populist key messages. The populism index was aggregated at the politician level,

indicating the share of tweets or posts per politician that contained a populist key message. Furthermore, we coded whether a party was typically classified as populist in the literature (e.g., Aalberg et al. 2017; Van Kessel 2015) as dummy variable (1 for populist party, 0 for non-populist party). The models also contain dummy variables for Facebook (1 for Facebook, 0 for Twitter), gender (1 for male, 0 for female), and party in power (1 for government, 0 for opposition party), as well as a variable controlling for the general profile reach, which refers respectively to the number of Facebook page likes and the number of Twitter followers per politician. While the first model only looks at the main effects of the independent variables, the second model additionally incorporates interaction terms between the populism index and Facebook and populist leader respectively.

For the interpretation of the independent variables, we focus on the incidence rate ratios, which correspond to exponential B-coefficients. Values higher than 1 indicate a positive influence; values below 1 indicate a negative influence on popularity indicators. Values with a p-value below .05 (confidence interval does not include 1) are statistically significant.

Source: Table created by Author

Recap and outlook

Social media give politicians an unfiltered communication channel to their followers. This fits populism's ideal of a direct connection to the people as well as populist leaders' self-perception as the voice of the people. With Facebook and Twitter, political leaders can circumvent the traditional news media, which populists often view as biased, hostile, or even, in Donald Trump's words, "the enemy of the people."

Thus, social media offer populists an ideal platform to appeal to the people, demand the people's sovereignty, and criticize the elite.

Social media also give an indirect advantage to populists in providing the means for disaffected citizens to express themselves and form online communities, which, in turn, lets politicians – particularly populist ones – tap into the potential of such partisan online crowds. It is another example, as Gerbaudo (2018) points out, of how well matched populism is with social media. This network effect is also a reason to continue exploring the relationship between populism and popularity cues.

Our empirical findings support earlier evidence that populism may help politicians of any stripe increase their social media popularity and reach. While leaders of typically populist parties were more successful overall with their Facebook posts and tweets, populist key messages from anyone had a positive influence on popularity cues.

However, this may depend on the platform. While Facebook posts with populist key messages received more likes and shares, populist tweets were actually less favorited or retweeted than non-populist tweets. This may be explained by the specific characteristics of these two platforms and their user demographics. Twitter is a more elite medium, which political leaders mostly use to interact with fellow politicians, journalists, or other elite actors. Facebook, in comparison, has a broader user base across different social groups and allows for closer and more personal interactions. (This observation is, of course, contradicted by Donald Trump's[5] often-populist Twitter use, which Stromer-Galley describes as vulgar eloquence in this volume).

However, our findings also show that political leaders who sent populist key messages more often overall also got more popularity cues on both platforms. Thus, while on Facebook the effect of populist communication could also be found for individual populist posts, on Twitter, the politician's image, or how populist he or she was overall, seemed to matter more to followers than what he or she actually said in an individual tweet.

Furthermore, we found that both typically "populist" and typically "non-populist" leaders could use populist key messages to gain popularity on social media, at least on Facebook. This could encourage politicians to use populist communication not only to gain

reach on social media but also to gain visibility in mainstream media (see Chadwick 2017). The effect of populist communication on popularity cues in connection with the "network effect" of social media, which further pushes popular content, may also explain why the most outrageous tweets (e.g., by Donald Trump) or specifically populist Facebook posts attract enormous attention from the traditional news media and the public (see Gerbaudo 2018).

If social media actually give an advantage to populist leaders or encourage normally non-populist political leaders to use populist communication, this may be seen as problematic from the perspective of liberal democracy. Although populism may legitimately express criticism of a growing gap between governments and citizens, scholars have argued it threatens to undermine central pillars of a liberal democracy (Kriesi 2014; Abts and Rummens, 2007). This is because treating the people as a homogenous group denies the idea of a pluralist society in which minorities should receive special protection. The demand for unrestricted popular sovereignty challenges the division of powers. Also, the hostile juxtaposition between the people and the elite may hamper considered, fact-based deliberation and compromise. Thus, if social media give an advantage to populist leaders, they may have negative consequences for political communication in liberal democracies (see Waisbord 2018).

However, this of course also depends on how important social media will be for political communication in the future and whether or how much political leaders are willing to adapt their communication to gain higher popularity or reach on these platforms. Thus, besides extending the scope of our findings with regard to politicians, countries, and other contextual factors, there is a case for future research to explore whether non-populist political leaders adapt their communication to fit the network logic of social media. And to investigate what the actual impact is of online popularity cues on citizens' perceptions, attitudes, and political actions.

Notes

[1] An exception is Switzerland, where national parliamentary elections were held on October 18, 2015. However, due to the Swiss direct democratic system, elections are seen as less important than the regular public votes on referenda on initiatives, of which none took place within the sampling period.

[2] For the US, due to its party system, only four parties were chosen: the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the Green Party, and the Tea Party Patriots.

[3] We chose negative binomial regression due to the distribution of the dependent variable, which is, typically for count distributions, right-skewed and has a standard deviation larger than the mean. This choice is in line with other recent studies using popularity cues as dependent variable (Bene 2017a; Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2018; Saxton and Waters 2014; Trilling, Tolochko, and Burscher 2016).

[4] In June 2018, Front National changed its name to Rassemblement National.

[5] As Mr. Trump did not hold any leader position in the party or country in 2015, he is not in our sample.

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D.4 Article IV

Hitting a Nerve: Populist News Articles Lead to More Frequent and More Populist Reader Comments

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Hitting a Nerve: Populist News Articles Lead to More Frequent and More Populist Reader Comments

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Although research on effects of populist communication has increased, it is still unclear how populism in news articles affects the readers' manifest behavior, such as whether and how they comment on online news. To address these issues, we conducted a content analysis of online news articles (N = 332) and corresponding reader comments (N = 2786) during election campaigns in France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. We find that populist key messages by political and media actors in news articles do not only provoke more reader comments but also prompt citizens to use populist key messages themselves in their comments – regardless of how journalists contextualize these statements.

Keywords populism, populist communication, online news, reader comments, election campaigns

It is a widely established hypothesis that populism in the media affects media users (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018). However, most empirical studies have focused on attitudinal effects (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2011, 2013; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017, 2018; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). It remains an open question if populism in the media may also induce populist behavior, such as the expression of populist ideology in public discourse. We know that the use of uncivil media may lead to an increased use of incivility in political expressions (Gervais, 2014), but we do not know if this finding from incivility research can also be applied to the area of populist communication.

Previous research has shown that populist communication can influence populist attitudes (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017), attitudes towards migrants (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Wirz et al., 2018), emotions (Wirz, 2018b; Wirz et al., 2018), the perception of political actors (e.g., Bos et al., 2013), voting behavior (e.g., Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2016), and political engagement (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018). These

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studies have mostly relied on experimental settings, while empirical studies under real-life conditions are scarce (rare exceptions: Bos et al., 2013; Müller et al., 2017; Wirz et al., 2018). Most of these experiments measured only planned and not manifest behavior. However, because planned behavior may be influenced by social desirability, past behavior, and anticipated emotions, it is often only an inaccurate approach to actual behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). More recently, research has also started to analyze effects of populist communication on user reactions on social media, relying on content analysis instead of surveys or experiments (Blassnig, Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, forthcoming; Bobba, 2018). This approach using digital trace data (Howison, Wiggins, & Crowston, 2011) has the advantage of a higher external validity. This is specifically relevant with regard to populist communication; in an artificial experimental situation, citizens may be more hesitant to express populist messages due to social desirability.

To narrow this substantive and methodological gap in the research, we pursue the question of how populist online news influences the number and content of reader comments. Reader comments are a particularly worthwhile object of investigation because of their dual nature. They can be regarded not only as an expression of communication behavior but may also influence other readers (e.g., Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Zerback & Fawzi, 2016). Furthermore, by focusing on online news, we can investigate populist statements by three key groups of actors – politicians, the media, and citizens (de Vreese et al., 2018) – and their interactions within the same platform.

We follow a communication-centered approach (de Vreese et al., 2018; Stanyer, Salgado, & Strömbäck, 2017) and conceptualize populism as a "thin" ideology (Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay, & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde, 2004) that political actors, journalists, and citizens can express via specific populist key messages (Blassnig, Ernst, Büchel, Engesser, & Esser, 2019; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018; Wirth et al., 2016; Wirz et al., 2018).

We conducted a content analysis of news articles and corresponding reader comments during election campaigns in France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. We find that populist key messages by political and media actors in news articles do not only provoke *more* reader comments but also prompt citizens to *use populist key messages themselves* in their comments – regardless of how journalists contextualize these statements.

Populist Online Communication

Connecting approaches in political science and communication science, we conceive of populism as a "thin" ideology (Mudde, 2004) or a "set of ideas" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018; Taggart, 2000) that can manifest discursively in the communication of political actors, media actors, or citizens (de Vreese et al., 2018).

At the core of populist ideology lies the Manichean juxtaposition of the pure, good people to a corrupt, detached elite, as well as the demand that politics should be an expression of the unrestrained popular will (Mudde, 2004). Furthermore, populist ideology conceives of "the people" as a monolithic entity that can have a common will, common desires and common interests. Consequentially, specific social groups who do not share the people's "good" characteristics, values, or opinions are perceived as out-groups or as "dangerous 'others'" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3). While "the elite" is subject to a vertical differentiation from "the people", "the others" are the target of a horizontal exclusion (Abts & Rummens, 2007). Following this conceptualization, populist ideology consists of four dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism, popular sovereignty, and the exclusion of others.

With regard to the fourth dimension, it is disputed whether the exclusion of others is a core element of populist ideology or specific of right-wing populism (see e.g., Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). Following de Vreese et al. (2018), we argue that the construction of specific out-groups is inherent in populism's monolithic conception of the people but that not all types of populism necessarily exclude a specific social group.

This populist ideology can be communicated by various actors by means of populist key messages. Consequentially, we do not argue that there are populist actors per se but that populism is a matter of degree and that anyone can become a "populist" by communicating populist key messages (de Vreese et al., 2018). From a political communication perspective, three key actors are of particular interest as communicators of populist key messages: 1) political actors, 2) the media, and 3) citizens (de Vreese et al., 2018).

Political actors have been featured most prominently in research on populism. Previous research shows that, on the one hand, populist communication is most often used by parties at both extremes of the political spectrum, opposition or challenger parties (Ernst et al., 2017). On the other hand, politicians of mainstream or moderate parties also rely on populist communication to some extent (Blassnig, Ernst, Büchel, & Engesser, 2018). Although new media allow politicians to circumvent traditional gatekeepers (Ernst et al., 2017), political actors are still highly reliant on journalistic media to gain a broad publicity for their messages. In turn, due to a high news value and compatibility with media logic, populist messages specifically meet the selection criteria of news media (Mazzoleni, 2008).

This leads to the second actor group of populist communication: the media. Esser, Stępińska, and Hopmann (2017) distinguish between populism *through* the media and populism *by* the media. In brief, from the perspective of populism *by* the media, the communicators of populist messages are the media (i.e., journalists) themselves, whereas populism *through* the media relates to populist messages by political actors that are disseminated through the media. Thus, the media can act as originators of populist key messages as well as a platform for populist communication by other actors, mostly by political actors. Furthermore, journalists can, of course, also criticize or challenge populist messages by political actors (Wettstein et al., 2018).

Such mediated populist messages by political or media actors are then received by citizens – the third actor group (de Vreese et al., 2018). On the one hand, this raises questions about the effects of populist communication on citizens (see e.g. Müller et al., 2017). On the other hand, citizens can become populist actors themselves. Especially online media allow the audience to engage easily with populist content by liking, sharing, or commenting. Thereby, citizens themselves can voice populist ideas in reaction to news coverage, which Esser et al., (2017) refer to as "populist citizen journalism."

The characteristics of online news media, such as the attention economy of the Internet, an increasingly commercialized media logic, and a more direct connection to the people, may foster populist communication by political actors, the media, and citizens (Blassnig et al., 2019). Online, these three actor groups can directly interact, and their communication is intertwined within the same platform. Populist key messages by political actors are cited and interpreted by the news media, and resonate with citizens as readers who like, share, or comment on such messages.

Online Reader Comments in the Public Sphere

The ability to directly comment on online news articles allows readers to actively engage with the news. In the literature, reader comments are associated both with positive as well as with negative developments for the online public sphere.

From the perspective of the media, high numbers of reader comments generate website traffic and contribute to high click rates (Anderson, 2011). Thus, reader comments can serve as popularity cues, indicating the attention received or the relevance of an article (Bene, 2017; Porten-Cheé, Haßler, Jost, Eilders, & Maurer, 2018). They may raise news consumer engagement and loyalty and are, therefore, often desirable from a commercial point of view (e.g., Vujnovic, 2011). Comments may also allow a more reciprocal exchange between journalists and their readers (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2013). However, problematic aspects, such as incivility or hate speech, present challenges for journalists and media organizations (e.g., Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015).

For citizens, reader comments provide a public space to interact with news content, voice their opinions, learn about other opinions, and debate with others (Ruiz et al., 2011; Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015; Stroud et al., 2015; Ziegele, Quiring, Esau, & Friess, 2018). Reader comments can contribute to a *deliberative* online public sphere, given that they adhere to specific standards, such as civility, reciprocity, or openness (Dahlberg, 2011). From a *liberal individualist* perspective, comments serve the uninhibited self-expression, possibly at the expense of deliberative standards (Freelon, 2015).

From a *communitarian* perspective, reader comments may serve as a means to collaborate with like-minded others to advance specific ideological goals while disengaging from outsiders (Freelon, 2015). Additionally, comment sections can constitute *counter publics*, where citizens express opinions that challenge the mainstream media or the perceived dominant public sphere (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Thus, from a participatory point of view, encouraging citizens to write comments may raise inclusion and opinion diversity, and promote a broader participation in the online public sphere (Ruiz et al., 2011; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015; Weber, 2014; Ziegele et al., 2018).

However, user comments are often also viewed as an aspect of several problematic developments in the online public sphere. Incivility and its effects on the deliberative quality of online discussions have been a central concern in previous research (Coe et al., 2014; Gervais, 2014; Ziegele et al., 2018). In contrast to counter publics, it has also been argued that comments may act as "echo chambers" that reinforce the opinion perceived as dominant within a certain media outlet or social group (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010; Walter, Brüggemann, & Engesser, 2016). Several authors have warned that in a high-choice media environment, this may lead to increasingly polarized or fragmented audiences (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Sunstein, 2002; Van Aelst et al., 2017). However, a growing number of recent empirical studies have put this into question (e.g., Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012).

Several of these aspects may render reader comments particularly prone to populist communication (Blassnig et al., 2019). Perceiving comment sections as communitarian spaces, counter publics, or echo chambers involves the construction of in- and out-groups, the conception of a people with a closed, collective identity, and the use of "us" vs. "them" rhetoric, which are all central characteristics of populist communication (Abts & Rummens, 2007; de Vreese et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004). The role of comments as liberal individualist self-expression brings to mind the populists' self-proclaimed defense of freedom of speech and zeal against the "political correctness" of the elites (Moffitt,

2016; Mudde, 2004). Additionally, reader comments are subject to less editorial control, norms, and gatekeeping processes that may filter out or attenuate populist communication in editorial content (Krämer, 2017).

The Influence of Populism in News Articles on Reader Comments

Our focus lies on the connection between populism in online news articles and the corresponding reader comments. On the one hand, as popularity cues, comments may contribute to higher click-rates and circulation of online news articles that contain populism, thereby providing a higher reach for these populist messages. On the other hand, the reader comments themselves may include and propagate populist statements.

In general, the characteristics of online news articles influence the level of participation in comment sections. Based largely on news value theory, previous research suggests that controversial issues, political or social conflicts, and negative or provocative messages (Tenenboim & Cohen, 2014; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014; Ziegele et al., 2018), certain news factors (Weber, 2014), or a generally high news value (Ziegele et al., 2018) can increase the number of commenters that respond to an article.

Populist communication has been described as highly compatible with media logic and attributed with a high news value (Mazzoleni, 2008). Populist messages often co-occur with a negative, emotionalized, or dramatized communication style (Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019). Therefore, it can be assumed that the occurrence of populist key messages may have a positive impact on the amount of comments an article receives. This is also supported by initial empirical evidence that populist content (Blassnig et al., forthcoming; Bobba, 2018) and related stylistic devices (Bene, 2017; Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2018) stimulate audience response on social media.

Based on the literature on effects of populist communication, these findings could be explained by different persuasion processes. From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), populist communication invokes specific in-group and out-group identities (Hameleers et al., 2017; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 9; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018): the pure people as threatened in-group against the corrupt elites and dangerous "others" as out-groups (Hameleers et al., 2018). This perception of in-group deprivation and out-group threat can mobilize people and trigger collective action (Hameleers et al., 2018; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Furthermore, populist communication could provoke reactions via emotional persuasion processes (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018; Wirz, 2018b). Populist messages can be explicitly emotional or include characteristics that make them more likely to elicit emotional responses through appraisal processes (Wirz, 2018b). Both positive and negative emotions – mostly anger, fear, hope, and pride – have been associated with populism, whereas especially anger and hope have been shown to increase the persuasiveness of populist demands (Wirz, 2018b) and may also increase the willingness to respond to such messages.

This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: Articles that contain populist key messages receive higher numbers of reader comments.

a. Articles that contain populist key messages *by political speakers* receive higher numbers of reader comments.

b. Articles that contain populist key messages *by media speakers* receive higher numbers of reader comments.

Journalistic content does not only have an impact on how many people comment on news articles but also on the content of online discussions (Gervais, 2014; Walter et al., 2016; Ziegele et al., 2018). Toepfl and Piwoni (2017) found that the emphasis structure of news articles predicts the emphasis frames used in attendant reader comments. Gervais (2014) shows that the use of media with higher levels of incivility leads to an increased use of incivility in the political expression of citizens. Walter et al. (2016), focusing on the topic of climate change, suggest that comment sections function as echo chambers.

Similarly, we believe that populism in news articles and populism in reader comments are related to each other. Krämer (2014) argues that populist communication activates a type of "populism schema," i.e., cognitive schemata that are related to the core dimensions of populist ideology. Accordingly, we may assume that populist media content has priming effects, making latent populist attitudes of recipients more salient in the short or long term (Krämer, 2014). Generally, (media) priming refers to effects of mediated content on people's subsequent judgements or behaviors (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002). More specifically, priming effects increase the (short-term) accessibility of certain concepts in memory, which may then have an increased likelihood of being used in subsequent evaluations (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). Thus, from the perspective of priming, populist communication activates preexisting populist ideas or attitudes in the memory of recipients, which means that the user is more likely to use them in judgements or evaluations in response to a message. In newspaper articles, populism is usually not presented as a thoroughly elaborated ideology, but as a collection of fragments. In this context, schema theory assumes that it is often sufficient to highlight one element of a cognitive cluster to coactivate other elements of the cognitive cluster (Bartlett & Burt, 1933; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Iran-Nejad, 1984). Thus, a news article that contains one dimension of populist communication may also make other dimensions more salient and, consequently, activate populist attitudes in total (Müller et al., 2017).

Populist ideas may serve as an interpretative framework for various events and can therefore also be understood as a frame (Aslanidis, 2015; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018). In addition to the priming approach, the cognitive effects of populist communication can also be examined with a framing approach. Previous studies have for example argued that populist communication affects recipients' attitudes via value framing (Wirz, 2018a) or blame attributions (Hameleers et al., 2017).

Findings by Müller et al. (2017) suggest that exposure to populist messages in the news leads to more populist attitudes, but only for those citizens who already agreed with populist ideas beforehand, overall fostering polarization. Similarly, Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) found in an experiment that populist messages communicated via social media increase populist attitudes only if recipients supported the source of the message. According to Wirz et al. (2018), anti-immigrant messages in the media lead to more negative cognitions toward immigrants, while populist content in general leads to more negative emotions.

Therefore, we formulate the second hypothesis, as follows:

H2: Comments are more likely to be populist if they respond to an article containing populist key messages.
   a. Comments are more likely to be populist if they respond to an article containing populist key messages *by political speakers*.
   b. Comments are more likely to be populist if they respond to an article containing populist key messages *by media speakers*.

The question arises whether this effect depends on how the media contextualize populist statements. The media may convey populist key messages by politicians in different ways. In addition to being originators of populist messages and gatekeepers for populist statements by political actors, the media may also interpret populist actors or ideas in their coverage and evaluate them positively or negatively (Esser et al., 2017; Wettstein et al., 2018). The media may neutrally disseminate populist key messages, attenuate or criticize them, or support, legitimize or reinforce them (Blassnig et al., 2019), and this may also influence the effect that they have on readers and their comments. Thus, how journalists transmit and interpret populist key messages may influence how citizens react to such articles in reader comments. Therefore, we formulate an additional open research question, as follows:

RQ1: Does the contextualization of populist key messages in news articles have an influence on the use of populist communication in reader comments?

Method

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of reader comments and the respective news articles during election campaigns in France (2017), Switzerland (2015), and the United Kingdom (2015). Additionally, we focused on online news coverage of the issue of immigration.

Sample

In the selection of the countries, we followed a most different systems within most similar systems design. On the one hand, we selected countries that have similar political, economic, and cultural settings within Western Europe. In addition, in all three countries (right-wing), populist parties were rather successful in the last European or national elections and have similar positions with regard to migration policy and EU integration. On the other hand, France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom differ distinctly with regard to their types of political systems and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Lijphart, 1999). This allows to investigate the relation between populism in articles and reader comments in varying contexts and enables a higher generalizability of our findings within Western Europe (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017).

The investigation period covers the six weeks before the most recent, regular national elections in the three countries. For the United Kingdom, we included the national parliamentary elections on May 7, 2015, for Switzerland, the national parliamentary elections on October 18, 2015, and for France, the presidential elections, with the first round occurring on April 23 and the second round on May 7, 2017. Election campaigns offer themselves as an inquiry period to investigate populist communication and reader comments, as they provide a pointed view of a country's political communication culture (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012) as well as a particularly contested environment in which populism is most likely to manifest itself (Plasser & Ulram, 2003). As populism is a rare and fragmented phenomenon in the overall news media coverage, the identification of a political issue that is affine to populism and has the potential of higher levels of populist

messages was crucial (Ernst, Esser, Blassnig, & Engesser, 2018). We focused on the populism affine topic of immigration because this topic is a polarized and conflict-laden issue and is particularly prone to right-wing populist rhetoric (Taggart, 2017). Recent comparative studies conducting qualitative interviews have found that journalists and politicians across several European countries see the topic of immigration as one of the most important drivers of populism (Salgado et al., 2019; Stanyer et al., 2019). Additionally, content analyses across European countries found that immigration was the most commented on topic in print news and among the topics that showed the highest share of populist messages (Ernst et al., 2018; Esser et al., 2019). Consequently, immigration is a highly important topic that is similarly relevant across the three investigated countries. It poses a particular challenge to responsible media coverage and may be specifically vulnerable to populist reader comments (Sheets et al., 2016).

We incorporated five online news outlets per country, comprising print-parent, TV-parent, and pure online outlets (see Table 1). For each country, we included the online outlets of two leading upmarket daily newspapers, the dominant mass-market daily paper, one TV-parent outlet, and the most important pure online outlet in each country.

To sample the relevant online news material, we followed a user-based sampling approach, placing the user perspective at the center and incorporating search strategies that are common in the everyday practice of the average Internet user. In this way, the sample is less representative of the overall population of news articles but more representative of the population that the users are actually confronted with. We relied on Google to search the specific news websites, using the same web browser (Google Chrome) in the "incognito" browsing mode for all searches and disabling the search history to ensure comparability and replicability. To ensure that the sampled articles related to the topic of immigration as well as to domestic politics, we used an immigration search string that additionally contained commonly used abbreviations or labels for four selected parties per country.[1]

For each news outlet, we then googled the search string translated into the respective language, restricted the search to the respective news website (site:*website.com*) and the time frame to the selected six weeks, and downloaded the first 30 listed news items (the first three pages). This yielded $n = 433$ news article of which $n = 332$ received at least one comment. For these articles, we sampled the first ten reader comments –, i.e., the first ten comments, chronologically, that were posted in direct response to the article.[2] The final sample comprises 332 articles and 2786 reader comments.

Table 1
Online news outlets

		Country		
		France	Switzerland	UK
Print-parent	Up-market	Lefigaro.fr Lemonde.fr	Nzz.ch Tagesanzeiger.ch	Telegraph.co.uk Theguardian.com
	Mass-market	Leparisien.fr	Blick.ch	dailymail.co.uk
TV-parent	Public	Info.france2.fr	Srf.ch	Bbc.co.uk
Pure online		tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/rue89	Watson.ch	Huffingtonpost.co.uk

Operationalization and Coding Procedure

Populist Key Messages. We regard populist communication as a formative measure (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, & Roth, 2008) based on the four dimensions and corresponding twelve populist key messages (see Table 2). The key messages were operationalized as dummy variables based on Cranmer (2011), Jagers and Walgrave (2007), and Wirth et al. (2016). For each category, we coded at the story level whether a given populist key message was present in an article or comment.

Speaker. For each populist key message, we coded whether the speaker was a political actor, a media actor, or a citizen. Populist statements by other actors were not incorporated in the analysis. A political speaker was a political actor who was quoted in the story either directly or indirectly. If the journalist herself made a populist statement, the speaker was coded as a media actor. For reader comments, the speaker was coded as citizen (except if the commenter was evidently a political or media actor).

Populism indices were calculated for the three speaker types, which were present if at least one of the twelve populist key messages was used in a story or comment by the respective speaker type.

Contextualization. In the event that there was a populist key message in a news story, we coded whether the author (i) disseminated the message neutrally, (ii) explicitly attenuated or criticized the message, (iii) provided a favorable context for the message that supported, reinforced, or legitimized it, or (iv) whether the author voiced populist key messages himself.

A team of ten intensively trained student coders had to pass several pretests as well as the final reliability test based on English-language material (31 online news articles and 30 reader comments, $n = 61$) and reached acceptable levels of reliability. The average Brennan and Prediger's K cross all populist key messages was .75. For the two speaker types (political speaker and media speaker), Brennan and Prediger's K was .79, and the contextualization displayed a Brennan and Prediger's K of .82 (see Table A in the online appendix).

Analysis

Depending on the specificities of the data and dependent variables, we employed different types of regression methods to answer the hypotheses. H1a and H1b were tested using negative binomial regression. This accounts for the right-skewed and overdispersed distribution of the count of comments per article, which served as the dependent variable. To test H2a and H2b and answer RQ1, we conducted multilevel regression models containing fixed-effects components to account for the fact that reader comments are nested within the articles they respond to.

Findings

Overall, journalists from British, French, and Swiss online media used at least one populist key message in 65 percent ($n = 214$) of the news articles analyzed. In 61 percent of these cases ($n = 131$), the journalists conveyed a populist message that originally came from a politician; and in 37 percent ($n = 79$), the journalists made their own populist statement. In terms of dimensions, journalists most often included anti-elitist messages in their stories (55%, $n = 181$). Less often, they used or cited messages related to people-centrism (22%, $n = 72$), exclusionism (11%, $n = 35$) or sovereignty (5%, $n = 15$). The articles received, on average,

Table 2
Operationalization of populist communication

Dimension	Populist key message	Description
People-Centrism	Approaching the people	The speaker describes himself or is described as belonging to the people, being close to the people, knowing the people, speaking for the people, caring for the people, agreeing with the people or performing everyday actions. The speaker claims to represent or embody the people.
	Praising the people's virtues	The people are attributed with positive traits such as morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc. The people are exempt from being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, etc.
	Praising the people's achievements	The people are described as being responsible for a positive development/situation, an achievement or benefit. Achievements include important, successful, "right" actions or other accomplishments.
	Describing the people as homogenous	The people are described as sharing a common understanding of the world, common feelings, desires, opinions, or a common will.
Anti-Elitism	Discrediting the elite	Negative personality traits, mistakes, and unlawful or immoral behavior of the elites are stressed. The elites are portrayed as corrupt, malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, evil, undemocratic, etc. The elite are called names and denied morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc.
	Blaming the elite	Elites are described as a threat/burden, or held responsible for negative developments/situations, specific failures, or as having committed specific mistakes or crimes.
	Detaching the elite from the people	Elites are described as not belonging to the people, not being close to the people, not knowing the people, not speaking for the people, not caring for the people, or not performing everyday actions.
Sovereignty	Demanding popular sovereignty	The speaker argues for general institutional reforms to grant the people more power by introducing direct-democratic elements or increasing political participation. The speaker argues in favor of granting more power to the people within the context of a specific issue (e.g., election, immigration, security).
	Denying elite sovereignty	The speaker argues in favor of granting less power to elites within the context of a specific issue (e.g., election, immigration, security).

Exclusion	Discrediting specific groups	Specific social groups or population segments are discredited, denounced, or stigmatized. They are portrayed as evil, criminal, lazy, stupid, immoral, dangerous, etc.
	Blaming specific groups	Specific social groups or population segments are held responsible for a negative, undesirable or harmful development/situation. They are described as not being responsible for a positive development or situation.
	Excluding specific groups	Specific societal groups or population segments are characterized as "others", juxtaposed to "the people", described as not belonging to the people, or not sharing their virtues.

272.48 comments (*MIN* = 1, *MAX* = 3997, *SD* = 601.67). Citizens voiced at least one populist key message in approximately a third (34%, *n* = 951) of all analyzed reader comments. Similar to the politicians and journalists, the citizens most often used anti-elitist key messages (28%, *n* = 786) and less often expressed key messages related to people-centrism (3%, *n* = 96), exclusion (3%, *n* = 94), or sovereignty (1%, *n* = 32).[3]

Hypothesis 1 postulated a positive relationship between populist key messages in articles and the total number of comments they receive in return. A negative binomial regression controlling for differences between countries and outlet types (see Table 3), shows that, as expected, populist communication by political speakers as well as by media speakers in articles is positively and significantly associated with higher numbers of comments. For the interpretation of the results, we focus on the incidence rate ratios (IRR), which correspond to exponential b-coefficients. Values higher than 1 indicate a positive influence, and values below 1 indicate a negative influence on the number of reader comments an article receives. More precisely, when the independent variable is present (in the case of dummy variables), the expected count of reader comments has to be multiplied by the IRR (Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2016). This suggests that articles in which journalists include populist statements by political actors trigger 2.28 times more reader comments, and articles in which journalists make their own populist statements drive up the number of reader comments by a factor of 1.80. This supports both H1a and H1b.

Observing the control variables, we see that news articles in Great Britain and France receive more reader comments overall than Swiss articles do and that readers of mass-market and pure online news websites comment less than readers of upmarket outlets.

To test hypotheses H2a and H2b and answer RQ1, we conducted four multilevel models (see Table 4) with maximum-likelihood estimation (ML). The dependent variable in all four models is populist communication by citizens in reader comments, which

Table 3
The influence of populist communication in articles on the total number of comments

		Number of Comments	
		IRR	*CI*
	(Intercept)	61.46***	[45.87, 82.35]
Country[a]	United Kingdom	8.76***	[5.84, 13.16]
	France	1.41*	[1.01, 1.99]
Outlet[b]	Mass-market	0.50***	[0.33, 0.74]
	Pure online	0.24***	[0.16, 0.35]
Article	Populism by Political Speaker	2.28***	[1.68, 3.09]
	Populism by Media Speaker	1.80***	[1.29, 2.51]
AIC		3863.81	
Log likelihood		−1923.91	
Omnibus-test		236.82*** (df = 6)	

Note. Negative binomial regression predicting the total number of comments in response to the articles (N = 332). IRRs with confidence intervals in brackets. Values < 1 indicate a negative effect; values > 1 indicate a positive effect. AIC = Akaike information criterion, IRR = incidence rate ratios, CI = confidence interval. [a]Switzerland was set as baseline category. [b]Up-market was set as baseline category.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 4
Multi-level models predicting populist communication in reader comments

	Populist Reader Comments							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	β	*(SE)*	*β*	*(SE)*	*β*	*(SE)*	*β*	*(SE)*
(Intercept)	−0.001	(0.022)	−0.001	(0.021)	−0.00	(0.021)	−0.00	(0.021)
Length of comment			0.216***	(0.019)	0.219***	(0.019)	0.217***	(0.020)
Mass-market outlet			−0.017	(0.022)	−0.032	(0.023)	−0.034	(0.023)
Pure online outlet			−0.042	(0.022)	−0.039	(0.022)	−0.041	(0.022)
Populism by Political Speaker					0.086***	(0.022)	0.083***	(0.022)
Populism by Media Speaker					0.051*	(0.022)		
Attenuation							0.017	(0.022)
Amplification							0.036	(0.021)
AIC	7891.51		7768.64		7754.22		7758.61	
BIC	7909.30		7804.23		7801.68		7812.01	
Log Likelihood	−3842.75		−3878.32		−3869.11		−3870.31	
Level 1 N (Comments)	2786		2786		2786		2786	
Level 2 N (Articles)	331		331		331		331	

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

indicates whether the commenter uses at least one populist key message. The units of analysis are reader comments, which are nested in the articles they respond to. Hence, the independent variables – source of the message (from the journalist himself or from a political source) and contextualization of the message (neutral transmission, negative attenuation or positive amplification by the journalist) – are both located at the second level, while the dependent variable is located at the first level. Additionally, we controlled for the length of a comment at the first level and for differences between types of outlets at the second level.[4]

In a first step, we assessed whether it is useful to apply a multilevel model. If we compare the intercept-only model (Model 1) with the baseline model ($\chi^2(2) = 19.81$, $p < .001$), we can conclude that the intercepts vary significantly across articles and significantly improved the model fit. In a second step, we added fixed-effects for the control variables (Model 2). As we can see in Table 4, the length of the reader comment has a significant impact on whether its author includes a populist message. It is relatively obvious that the longer a comment is, the more likely it is that it contains populist communication. The type of the outlet, however, does not have any significant influence on the amount of populism in reader comments. Thus, no differences can be found between upmarket, mass-market, or pure online outlets. A model comparison demonstrated that the model fit significantly increased for model 2 ($\chi^2(1) = 128.87$, $p < .001$).

Hypotheses H2a and H2b predicted that populist communication by political speakers as well as by media speakers would increase the probability that citizens respond with populist key messages in their comments as well. To test these hypotheses, we added two fixed effects for populist communication by political speakers (dummy) and populist communication by media speakers (dummy) to the model. Again, a model comparison revealed that the model fit improves for model 3 ($\chi^2(1) = 18.42$, $p < .001$). We find clear support for both subhypotheses. Populist communication by political speakers ($\beta = 0.086$, $t(326) = 3.88$, $p < .001$) and by media speakers ($\beta = 0.051$, $t(326) = 2.37$, $p < .05$) significantly predict populist reactions in reader comments. On online news sites, citizens thus felt motivated to spread populist views and propositions if the underlying news articles also made populist statements.

Finally, RQ1 asked whether the contextualization of populist key messages by journalists might have an influence on the amount of populism in reader comments. To answer this question, we added fixed effects to the model for whether journalists either muted or strengthened (attenuated or amplified) populist statements by politicians. Since we regarded it also as amplification if the journalists themselves acted as the originators of populist key messages, model 4 does not include populism by media speakers as an independent variable. A model comparison showed that adding these variables does not improve the model fit ($\chi^2(1) = 2.40$, *n. s.*). Additionally, when we look at model 4, neither attenuation nor amplification have a significant effect on populism in reader comments, while populist communication by political speakers remains a significant factor ($\beta = 0.083$, $t(325) = 3.74$, $p < .001$). Thus, populist key messages by politicians seem to affect populism in reader comments regardless of whether these messages are attenuated, amplified, or transmitted neutrally by the media. For readers who operate with populist arguments, the interpretation and embedding by the journalist is largely irrelevant; such readers mainly focus on statements by politicians.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article set out to investigate how populism in the media affects the media users. Specifically, we analyzed the influence of populist statements by political and media actors in news articles on immigration on the number and content of reader comments

during election periods in France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Our findings suggest that populism in articles leads to *more frequent* and *more populist* reader comments. These effects may be explained by several causal mechanisms such as priming, framing, or emotional persuasion processes. Thus, populist messages in online news articles seem to hit a nerve with the readers by activating populist attitudes, in-group and out-group identifications, or eliciting emotions that prompt them to comment more and in a more populist manner.

Populism seems to generate more attention among readers and encourage citizens to engage in online discussions. As discussed above, this may be explained by populism's news value, its ability to mobilize citizens by activating in-group and out-group identifications, or emotional persuasion processes. On the one hand, this can be seen as desirable from a participatory viewpoint, if populist communication raises participation and possibly opinion diversity in the online public sphere. On the other hand, this may also help to propagate the populist key messages in the articles, which may be regarded as problematic from the perspective of liberal democracy, as we will elaborate below. In both cases, if populism generates a high user response, it may be beneficial from a commercial viewpoint for the media to cite or voice such messages in their content.

Whether reader comments can be considered desirable, of course, depends on their content. In this regard, our results imply that populism in the news may incite more populist content by readers and, thus, foster a proliferation of populist ideas. In line with our theoretical expectations based on schema theory and similar argumentation by Müller et al. (2017), populist key messages in the news seem to have priming effects on citizens that activate a populism schema and prompt them to use such populist elements themselves in their responding reader comments.

Furthermore, it does not seem to matter whether journalists moderate populist messages by political actors or not. Neutrally transmitted populist key messages lead just as much to more populism in reader comments as attenuated or amplified populist statements do. This would imply that simply reporting on populist actors and their statements is sufficient to activate populist commenters. However, we only coded for explicit attenuation or amplification by journalists. Future research should include a more fine-grained measurement of moderation that includes any type of challenge or support for populist statements to conclusively answer this question, especially since other research suggests that populist statements are more often challenged by journalists, at least in print news (Wettstein et al., 2018).

If reader comments contribute to the dissemination of populist communication in the online public sphere, this can be regarded as problematic from the perspective of liberal democracy. While some scholars regard populism as an inherent feature of a democratic system (Canovan, 1999; Mény & Surel, 2002), it is more often described as a threat, as populism undermines central aspects of liberal democracy (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Taggart, 2000) and may negatively impact political communication (Waisbord, 2018). However, if a reader comment is populist, this does not necessarily mean that it is uncivil or impolite. In fact, our material showed that populist comments can indeed lead to arguments that may be considered as deliberative. Thus, citizens may also formulate legitimate criticism in a populist way. Additionally, as our data shows, exclusionist key messages, which are most closely linked to extreme right-wing or racist statements, are rather rare. Much more common is an anti-elitist rhetoric, mostly against the political establishment. First, this may have to do with the fact that media outlets may delete openly racist or discriminating comments. Second, during election campaigns, citizens may be specifically prone to voice their discontent with the political elite.

Some additional limitations need to be considered. First, although our study is comparative across three countries and different types of media outlets, the scope of our sample is limited. Thus, the found effects would need to be replicated in other countries, specifically with regard to non-Western or non-European countries. Additionally, with our focus on elections and the topic of immigration, we study populism under most-likely conditions. Populism in news articles as well as in reader comments may additionally be fueled by the polarized context of elections as well as by the controversial and populism-affine topic. Consequentially, the results can be generalized to other issues only with caution. Based on other recent studies (Ernst et al., 2018), we would expect the overall levels of populism in news articles to be lower for less populism-affine issues and therefore also the effects on reader comments to be weaker. Nevertheless, we believe that the high importance and prevalence of immigration in current political news renders our results specifically relevant for populist communication. Second, our sampling procedure leads to additional limitations. Since we only sample the first ten reader comments that directly respond to the articles, our findings may not apply to comment sections overall. However, existing research shows that not only the articles but also previous comments may influence if and how readers formulate subsequent comments (Zerback & Fawzi, 2016; Ziegele et al., 2014; Ziegele, Weber, Quiring, & Breiner, 2017). We therefore believe that the first ten reader comments are influenced less by the subsequent reader comments and are more directly a response to the original article. On the other hand, primacy effect research lets us expect that the first ten reader comments arguably receive the most attention from other users (e.g., Anderson, 1965). Consequently, they may substantially influence subsequent reader comments and disproportionally steer the direction of the discussion in the comment section. Third, we do not know how the respective media outlets moderate their comment sections. Thus, the criteria for deleting comments are unclear and the comment function may be blocked entirely for certain articles. This could influence our results if populist communication was systematically related to being deleted by journalistic moderators. This is conceivable since populist communication is often associated with taboo-breaking and controversial language and the media outlets would probably delete reader comments that contain uncivil anti-elitist attacks or racist exclusionist statements. If this were the case, our results would rather underestimate the effects. Fourth, we did not code for other substantive characteristics of reader comments, such as incivility or deliberativeness. For future studies, it would be interesting to investigate how they relate to populist communication in reader comments. Finally, relying solely on content analysis of digital trace data has certain limits. For one thing, we cannot control for citizens' attitudes, sociodemographic characteristics, or political opinions. Only a small share of online news readers actually use the comment function; hence, reader comments are not representative of public opinion (Springer et al., 2015; Walter et al., 2016). Thus, our findings may only apply to a specific group of people who are particularly prone to comment on news articles as one of the first commenters. Nevertheless, we believe that these comments are relevant as they may also influence attitudes, opinions, or perceptions of public opinion of inactive observers that only read comment sections without commenting themselves (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Zerback & Fawzi, 2016). Moreover, although our findings confirm our theoretical expectations that populist communication has priming effects, we cannot effectively determine which underlying cognitive or affective processes explain these effects best. This is a disadvantage in comparison to experimental settings in exchange for the higher validity of digital trace data. Future research can determine which theoretical model fits best.

Overall, our study demonstrates that (1) populist key messages resonate with citizens and are disseminated by them (populism resonates); (2) populist key messages lead to more populist key messages (populism multiplies); and (3) we find that, at least in our case, journalistic contextualization does not matter significantly. With the continuing rise of populist political actors in several countries, such as France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, specifically on the right side of the political spectrum, the media is repeatedly confronted with the question of how to cover such populist actors and issues. Although other recent studies suggest that the media often challenge populist actors and their statements (Wettstein et al., 2018), our results imply that even the attenuation of populist messages by media speakers does not lead to a reduced number of populist reader comments. While a high participation in the online public sphere is desirable, high levels of populism may have negative consequences for political communication in liberal democracies. Therefore, we need more research on how citizens react and contribute to online populist communication.

Notes

1. The search strings for the three different countries were as follows:
CH: migration OR immigration OR zuwanderung OR flüchtling OR ausländer OR asyl OR einbürgerung OR ausschaffung "SVP" OR "SP" OR "Lega" OR "FDP" UK: migration OR immigration OR refugee OR foreigner OR asylum OR naturalisation OR deportation Labour OR "Scottish National Party" OR SNP OR "Liberal Democrats" OR "Lib Dems" FR: migration OR immigration OR réfugié OR étranger OR asile OR naturalisation OR expuls OR reconduite "Front National" OR "FN" OR "Parti socialiste" OR "PS" OR "Corsica Libera" OR "Parti libéral démocrate" OR "PLD".

2. For those news outlets where it was not possible to change the order of the reader comments (Le Figaro, Le Monde, Le Parisien, Rue89, Blick, SRF, Watson), the ten newest reader comments were selected for the sample.

3. An overview of descriptive statistics for all variables can be found in Tables C and D in the online appendix.

4. As additional robustness checks, we ran the multi-level models with the three countries as well as with the 16 news outlets as additional random effects on the third level of the models. Either way, we could replicate the same results for all four models. However, since the inclusion of a third level did not improve model fit, we preferred the presented models with two levels.

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Supplementary material

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/knv6e/?view_only=00a0fed2ca434490ba087c12031239b0

Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data through Open Practices Disclosure. The materials are openly accessible at https://osf.io/knv6e/?view_only=00a0fed2ca434490ba087c12031239b0

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D.5 Article V

Populist and Popular: An Experiment on the Drivers of User Reactions to Populist Posts on Facebook

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Populist and Popular: An Experiment on the Drivers of User Reactions to Populist Posts on Facebook

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Abstract

Populist politicians are often associated with the successful use of social networking sites (SNS). However, it is still unclear whether the popularity of populist posts is driven by the nature of the messages, by the populist actors as the source, or by the interaction of both factors. By following a 2 × 2 experimental design ($N = 647$) and by manipulating populist versus nonpopulist messages in a Facebook post and a typically populist versus mainstream politician as the source, this study contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it shows that both populist messages and populist actors foster the perception of a Facebook post as populist but that only populist messages are drivers of user reactions. Second, complementing content analyses on populism and user reactions, the study demonstrates that the effect of populist communication on user reactions is moderated by recipients' populist attitudes. Users with strong populist attitudes share populist messages more often than they share nonpopulist messages.

Keywords

populism, social media, user reactions, schema theory

Populist politicians are often associated with the successful use of social networking sites (SNS). First, research shows that SNS—particularly Facebook—are well-suited channels for distributing populist messages (e.g., Ernst et al., 2017; Groshek & Engelbert, 2012; Stier et al., 2017). Second, studies demonstrate that citizens with high populist attitudes are more likely to use Facebook to obtain political information (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schulz, 2018). Finally, initial research indicates that populist actors and populist messages are both drivers of user reactions on Facebook (Blassnig et al., 2020; Bobba, 2019). However, so far, studies on the relationship between populist communication and user reactions on SNS have relied exclusively on quantitative content analyses of digital trace data and have therefore largely focused on the supply-side of populist communication.

Taking a demand-side perspective, one may assume that reactions to populist messages on SNS are influenced by the characteristics of the message, the sender, and the recipient. On the one hand, existing research demonstrates that the effects of populist communication are moderated by recipients' preexisting populist attitudes (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018; Müller et al., 2017). Findings by Müller et al. (2017) show that exposure to populist messages reinforces both prior agreement and disagreement with populist ideas. It is therefore reasonable to assume that prior populist attitudes may moderate whether a recipient likes, shares, or comments a post with a populist message or by a populist politician. On the other hand, experimental studies suggest that the source of the message may influence the effect of populist messages in Facebook posts (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). However, it is still unclear whether and how these two factors—populist messages and populist actors as the senders of messages—interact. Do populist actors activate a corresponding schema—a "populism schema"—that increases the perception of populist elements (i.e., anti-elitism, people-centrism, and popular sovereignty) in their messages?

To address this research gap, this study analyzes the effect of populist communication on user reactions using an online survey experiment. Thereby, it adds to the existing literature

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with a twofold contribution. First, by following a 2 × 2 design ($N = 647$) and by manipulating populist versus nonpopulist messages in a Facebook post and a typically populist versus a mainstream politician as the source, the study allows us to investigate how populist messages and populist actors interact and how both components foster user reactions. We assume that a populist actor as the source of a message activates a populism schema, which increases the perception of a message as being populist. Second, this study complements existing content analyses on populism and user reactions by analyzing not only the effect of populist communication on user reactions but also how the effect is moderated by recipients' populist attitudes.

Popularity on SNS

SNS have become a very important channel for political actors to communicate with their constituencies. On the one hand, SNS provide a platform where messages can be sent directly to a large audience of like-minded supporters while circumventing the media (Ernst et al., 2017). On the other hand, messages on SNS are not only distributed to the primary audience following the sender of the message but also to a secondary audience; when individuals like, share, or comment on a message, the content becomes visible to their followers or friends as well (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). This two-step flow of communication (Katz, 1957) follows a genuine logic in the online world, which has been referred to as "privileging popularity" (Webster, 2011, p. 54). This means that popular content is privileged over unpopular content both by the sender of a message, who seeks to promote content that resonates with the audience, and by the audience, which uses popularity as a selection criterion given the multitude of information online (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018).

In light of the importance of popularity for the distribution of content on SNS, a growing body of research has evolved around the concept of popularity cues. The term refers to user reactions such as likes or shares of content on SNS (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018). Recent research has identified several characteristics that drive popularity online, including the newsworthiness of content (Trilling et al., 2016), emotionality (Bene, 2017a; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018), the presence of populist claims (Blassnig et al., 2020; Bobba, 2019), and characteristics of the source of the message (Blassnig et al., 2020; Bobba, 2019; Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). These findings suggest that posts by populist actors perform particularly well with regard to online popularity. Both populist communication and populist leaders have been identified as drivers of user reactions. In the following section, we will therefore have a closer look at populist communication and its potential effects on user engagement.

Populist Communication and Its Effects

Populism can be conceived of as a "set of ideas" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018) or as a "thin" ideology that sees society divided into two antagonistic groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and that postulates that politics should be an expression of the people's will (Mudde, 2004). This ideology manifests as the expression of populist ideas in the form of populist communication (de Vreese et al., 2018; Wirth et al., 2016). Populist communication is characterized by messages blaming or discrediting the elite (anti-elitism), praising or approaching the people (people-centrism), and statements demanding more power for the people (people's sovereignty) (Wirth et al., 2016).

From a communication-centered perspective (Stanyer et al., 2017), a politician becomes populist by communicating populist messages to the public. This implies that, first, any politician across the political spectrum may use populist communication and that, second, politicians can be populist to different degrees depending on the extent to which they send populist messages. In contrast, research following an actor-centered approach defines specific parties or politicians as a priori populist (Stanyer et al., 2017). Various studies have compiled categorizations identifying populist actors (see, for example, Rooduijn et al., 2019). Empirical research indicates that members of these typically populist parties use populist communication to a larger extent than members of nonpopulist parties (Ernst et al., 2019).

On the demand-side, populism manifests in the form of populist attitudes that can be defined as the degree of agreement with a populist ideology at the individual level (Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz, Müller, et al., 2018). Accordingly, someone with high populist attitudes has a negative attitude toward the elite (anti-elitism), perceives the people as homogeneous and virtuous (people-centrism), and supports the demand that the people should be granted more power (people's sovereignty) (Schulz, Müller, et al., 2018). These populist attitudes are relatively stable and operate as a latent demand or a disposition that can be made salient by specific contexts or contents (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Activation of a Populism Schema

Populist attitudes can also be conceived of as a cognitive schema—a "populism schema" (Krämer, 2014). Schema theory suggests that human cognition is organized in the form of relational topic clusters. Accordingly, schemata can be described as domain-specific relational clusters or mental structures that organize our memory and influence the human perception and processing of new information (Bartlett & Burt, 1933; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Iran-Nejad, 1984). A "populism schema," thus, describes a relational cognitive cluster related to the core ideas of populist ideology (i.e., anti-elitism, people-centrism, and popular sovereignty). This cognitive schema may be activated by

populist communication. Consequently, we may assume that populist posts by politicians on SNS have priming effects (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002), increasing the (short-term) accessibility of a populist cognitive schema in the memory of recipients. Hence, populist communication activates preexisting populist attitudes by making them more salient. According to schema theory, highlighting one element of a cognitive cluster is often sufficient to coactivate other elements of the cognitive cluster (Bartlett & Burt, 1933; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Iran-Nejad, 1984). Messages that contain one dimension of populist communication may also make other dimensions more salient and activate a populist schema in total (Müller et al., 2017). Following this argument, one can assume that actors who are typically associated with populist ideas or known for populist communication may similarly activate a populism schema. The activation of such a schema may increase the salience of populist attitudes and bias message processing toward schema-congruent elements (Galambos et al., 1986; Lodge & Hamill, 1986). Specifically, on SNS, where political actors send out messages with a high frequency, the image of a politician as populist and their overall extent of populist communication may have a spillover effect on messages that do not contain any populist elements. There is initial evidence that the source of a message influences the effect of populist messages communicated via SNS: Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) show in an experiment that populist Facebook messages only reinforce citizens' populist attitudes for those who support the source of the message. However, the interaction of populist (vs. nonpopulist) messages and populist (vs. nonpopulist) actors as the source of a message has not yet been investigated. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1. A Facebook post will be perceived as more populist if the sender is a typically populist actor compared to a typically nonpopulist actor, regardless of whether it contains populist messages.

Effects on User Reactions

Experiments have shown that populist messages reinforce populist attitudes but only for people who identify with populist politicians or citizens (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017) or who have a higher feeling of relative deprivation (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018). Measuring long-term exposure to populist communication based on content analysis and panel survey data, Müller et al. (2017) show that exposure to populist messages in the news increases populist attitudes but only for those citizens who already had higher populist attitudes beforehand. For citizens with low populist attitudes, exposure to populist communication leads to a lower agreement with populist ideas. These findings provide support for the theoretical assumption that populist communication makes mainly preexisting populist attitudes more salient and suggest that these prior populist attitudes act as a moderator of the effects of populist communication. The argument that exposure to information that confirms recipients' preexisting beliefs reaffirms those beliefs, whereas exposure to information that challenges preexisting beliefs leads to a rejection of that information and a doubling-down on those beliefs does not apply exclusively to populist attitudes. It can also be linked to broader concepts such as motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), confirmation bias (Klapper, 1960), or attitude polarization (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

In addition to attitudinal effects, research has also investigated the effects of populist communication on behavioral outcomes or intentions. Findings by Hameleers, Bos, Fawzi, et al. (2018) indicate that the combination of people-centrist and anti-elitist messages increases the likelihood that people will become politically engaged. From a theoretical perspective, this can be explained based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), according to which populist communication invokes specific in-group and out-group identities (Hameleers et al., 2017b; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). The perception of the people as a deprived in-group and the elites as an out-group threat may have a mobilizing effect on people and trigger collective action (Hameleers, Bos, Fawzi, et al., 2018; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Furthermore, studies have started to investigate the effects of populist communication in social media posts on citizens' reactions based on digital trace data. Initial empirical evidence suggests that populist communication leads to more user reactions in reaction to politicians' Facebook posts (Blassnig et al., 2020; Bobba, 2019), as well as to more reader comments and more populist reader comments in response to online news articles (Blassnig et al., 2019). The results by Blassnig et al. (2020) further suggest that populist leaders receive more user reactions overall on Facebook and Twitter than mainstream political leaders. However, these studies were based on content analyses and therefore cannot control for recipients' sociodemographic characteristics, political orientation, or populist attitudes. Building on research on the effects of populist communication, we expect that the populist attitudes of recipients will act as a moderator. First, we expect that mainly those recipients who agree with populist ideas will be mobilized into collective action by such messages. Second, since user reactions on Facebook—specifically likes and shares that are the most common reactions—can be mainly interpreted as positive reactions toward a message (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018), we assume that recipients are more likely to react to a Facebook post by a populist politician and/or a post containing populist messages if they have high populist attitudes. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a. Recipients are more likely to react to a Facebook post containing populist messages than to a nonpopulist Facebook post.

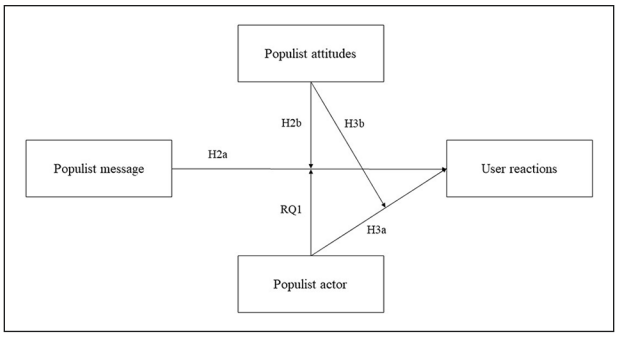

Figure 1. The influence of populist messages and populist actors on user reactions: a moderation model.

H2b. Recipients with higher populist attitudes are more likely to react to a Facebook post containing populist messages than recipients with lower populist attitudes.

H3a. Recipients are more likely to react to a Facebook post by a typically populist politician than by a mainstream politician.

H3b. Recipients with higher populist attitudes are more likely to react to Facebook posts by a typically populist politician than recipients with lower populist attitudes.

Thus far, content analyses have shown that both populist messages and populist actors are separate predictors of user reactions. Since we assume that populist messages and typically populist politicians activate a similar cognitive schema, this leads to the question of whether the content and actors are substitutes for each other in terms of their effects or whether they will have an interaction effect.

RQ1. Do the effects of populist messages and populist actors on user reactions interact?

Figure 1 summarizes the hypotheses with regard to the influence of the populist message and the populist actor on user reactions in a moderation model.

Finally, although they can all be interpreted as indicators of popularity or virality, different types of user reactions such as likes, shares, and comments can be differentiated with regard to their degree of activation (Berger & Milkman, 2012) and the user intention behind them (Bene, 2017b). *Liking* a Facebook post requires minimal action and implies the rather passive expression of approval, agreement, or affirmation. *Sharing* a post requires a stronger activation of users, who disseminate the message within their own network and may add an individual annotation or opinion to the original post. Finally, by *commenting*, users may voice their opinions about the content or source of an original post, engage in a dialogue with the source, or interact with other users. Thus, populist messages and actors may differently affect the likelihood of recipients liking, sharing, or commenting. Since there has not been much research on this, we have formulated an open question in this regard.

RQ2. Do populist messages and populist actors as well as recipients' populist attitudes have different effects on users' likelihood to like, share, and comment on a post?

Methods

Participants

Participants ($N=647$) were recruited by the professional market research company Respondi in the German-speaking part of Switzerland with an online access panel. They received a standard incentive for participation. Due to the research interest, participants were asked in the beginning how often they use Facebook for any purpose. Participants who stated that they never use Facebook were excluded from the sample. Of the remaining 647 participants, 6.5% used Facebook less than monthly, 10% monthly, 19.5% weekly, 31.7% daily, and 32.3% used Facebook several times a day. Through a quota procedure, we additionally aimed at a sample representative of the Swiss population regarding gender, age, and education. Women accounted for 50.9% of the participants. The participants were between 18 and 69 years old ($M=43.23$, $SD=13.66$). With regard to education, 55.8% had a university or college degree, 32.6% completed high school or vocational training, and 11.3% had only mandatory education.

Design and Procedure

The experiment was administered online in February 2019. The participants were informed that they will see a political Facebook post and will be asked questions about this post. However, they were not informed in advance about the central concepts of interest in the study. After giving informed consent, the participants were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups: (1) a populist message by a typically populist politician, (2) a nonpopulist message by a typically populist politician, (3) a populist message by a typically nonpopulist politician, or (4) a nonpopulist message by a typically nonpopulist politician.

Each group was presented with a Facebook post that was designed for the purpose of this study. The posts consisted of a message arguing for a stronger control of immigration and a picture of a link to a nonfictitious article by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on the negative long-term consequences of immigration. The claim (for more control of immigration) was consistent across all stimuli, whereas the exact wording and the sender of the post were adjusted according to the experimental manipulation.

While seeing the Facebook post, the participants were able to react directly to the post by using imitations of Facebook's user reactions (like/reactions, share, and comment). Afterward, the participants reported their intention to

like, share, or comment on the post, and their political orientation, populist attitudes, and support for the promoted claim. Furthermore, the participants' perceptions of populist communication and the politicians' party affiliation were assessed as a treatment check. Finally, the participants were thanked and informed about the fictitiousness of the posts and the purpose of the study.

Manipulation of Independent Variables

Populist versions of the post included three populist key messages blaming the political elite, approaching the people, and demanding the people's sovereignty. These populist key messages were formulated based on content analyses measuring populist communication in politicians' speeches, social media posts, or the media (Wirth et al., 2016). A pretest ($N = 107$) using the same items as in the treatment check (see next section) confirmed that the populist version of the post was perceived to be significantly more populist than the nonpopulist version of the post.

Two real Swiss politicians were chosen as the senders of the Facebook posts. We selected two well-known official representatives of typically populist and nonpopulist parties who are regularly present in the media. Based on a pretest ($N = 65$) assessing the image of politicians, Roger Köppel, a national councilor for the *Swiss People's Party* (SVP), was chosen as the typically populist actor. As the typically nonpopulist politician, Gerhard Pfister, a national councilor and party leader of the *Christian Democratic Party* (CVP), was chosen.

Measurement of Dependent and Control Variables

User Reactions. While seeing the Facebook post, the participants were able to directly react to the post by clicking on imitations of Facebook's popularity cues for likes, reactions ("love," "wow," "haha," "angry," "sad"), and shares, or by using a comment box. In addition, after seeing the post, the intention or willingness of the participants to react to the post was measured by three items asking them to estimate the likelihood that they would like, share, or comment on the post on a scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*highly likely*). As the dependent variable for H2a to RQ2, an index was built computing the mean values for the willingness to like, share, or comment on the post (Cronbach's $\alpha = .791$).

If the participants reported a likelihood above 3 for either liking, sharing, or commenting on the post, the motive behind this intention was asked for. The participants indicated on a scale from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*fully applies*) which of the six to eight proposed motives applied (e.g., "by clicking on 'Like' on this Facebook post, I want to signal that I like the content of the post" or "by sharing this Facebook post, I want to show my friends that I've read the post"). If the participants reported a likelihood below 3 for liking, sharing, or commenting on the post, they were similarly asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*fully applies*) which motives applied to *not* reacting to the post (e.g., "I do not agree with the content of the post").

Populist Messages. The main objectives were to test (1) whether populist actors influence the perception of the message as containing populist elements and (2) whether populist communication fosters user reactions. To test these hypotheses, it was essential to assess whether participants perceived the Facebook posts as representing populist communication, that is, containing people-centrist statements, anti-elitist statements, or statements demanding popular sovereignty. Therefore, a treatment check was implemented after the measurement of the dependent variables. On a scale from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*fully applies*), participants indicated their perception of populist messages (eight items, for example, "The Facebook post demanded more political influence for the people"). An index was built by computing the mean values for all items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .696$).

Populist Attitudes. Populist attitudes were measured with a scale by Schulz, Müller, et al. (2018). The items reflected three subdimensions of the populist ideology: anti-elitism, the perceived homogeneity of the virtuous people, and a demand for people's sovereignty. All items were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*totally agree*). An index was built using all 12 items of the scale, which showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .846$).

Party Affiliation. As an indicator of whether the participants recognized and correctly identified the politicians, they had to specify to which party they believed the politicians belonged. This was asked with a single-choice question with the five largest Swiss parties, "other" and "do not know" as possible answers.

Political Orientation. As a control variable, political left–right orientation was measured with a single item ranging from 1 (*left*) to 7 (*right*).

Support of the Promoted Claim. The participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the central claim of the Facebook post that immigration to Switzerland should be curtailed. The participants were asked whether they agreed with this claim on a scale from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*totally agree*).

Results

Treatment Check

Before testing our hypotheses, we performed two treatment checks to assess participants' perception of the experimental manipulation. First, we checked whether the participants

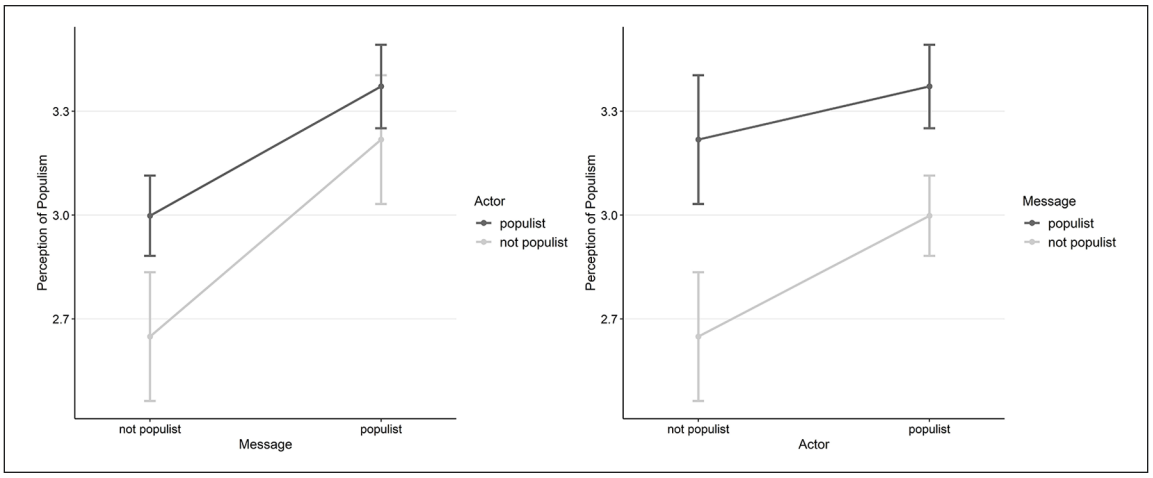

Figure 2. Estimated means and confidence intervals for the perception of populism for populist vs. non populist message and actor.

were familiar with the political actor and correctly identified his party affiliation. This was a necessary precondition for the experimental manipulation of the source, as the effect of a typically populist versus nonpopulist source can only occur when participants know the respective actors. Roger Köppel, the populist actor, was correctly identified by 71.5% of the sample, while Gerhard Pfister, the nonpopulist actor, was correctly identified by 29.3% of the sample. In the following, we will run analyses both based on the full sample ($N=647$) and based only on the subset of participants who correctly recognized the politicians ($n=327$).

Second, the perceived degree of populism in the posts was assessed. Neglecting the two different sources, the perception of the populist messages in the populist and nonpopulist posts was compared by means of an analysis of variance (ANOVA). The analysis revealed that the recognition of populist messages varied significantly between the groups and in the expected direction. Populist messages were recognized significantly more by the participants in the populist message group ($M=3.357$) than by the participants in the nonpopulist message group, $M=2.948$, $F(2, 647)=69.267$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.097$.

Effect of the Actor on the Perception of Populism

H1 postulates that not only the populist message but also the populist actor may activate a populism schema and thus influence the perception of a Facebook post as populist. To test this hypothesis, a two-factor ANOVA was conducted with the populist versus nonpopulist message and the populist versus nonpopulist actor as independent variables and the index of the perception of populist messages as the dependent variable. We restricted the sample to those participants who correctly identified the party affiliation of the political actor in the post ($n=327$), as the manipulation of the source depends on the recognition of the actors (i.e., the manipulation can only be effective if the participants recognize the actors as populist or nonpopulist). After ensuring the condition of recognition, both the content (populist message), $F(2, 327)=35.408$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.099$, and the source (populist actor), $F(2, 327)=10.060$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.030$, have a significant main effect, but there is no significant interaction, $F(2, 327)=1.521$, *ns*. As expected, the Facebook posts were perceived as more populist if the message was populist or the source was a typically populist politician. The estimated marginal means analyses (see Figure 2) further show that for both politicians, the posts that contained populist messages were perceived as more populist. Furthermore, posts that did not contain any populist messages were perceived as significantly more populist when the source was a populist politician. Thus, the presence of a typically populist actor as the source of a message contributed to the perception of populism in a message, even if the message itself did not have any populist elements. H1 can thus be confirmed for participants who were familiar with the source of the message.

Effects of Populism on User Reactions

In the next step, we investigated the effects of populist messages and populist actors as sources on user reactions to posts. Overall, 56.6% of participants ($n=366$) clicked on at least one of the simulated user reactions. The most clicked was the "like" button with 23.5% ($n=152$), followed by the "share" button with 11.9% ($n=77$), the possibility to write a direct comment (10.8%, $n=70$), and the reactions "angry" (10.5%, $n=68$) and "sad" (9.1%, $n=59$). Less clicked were the reactions "wow" (6.8%, $n=44$), "haha" (4.5%, $n=29$), and "love" (0.3%, $n=2$). The reported likelihood of interacting with the post was relatively low overall ($M=1.848$, $SE=1.192$). This index presents a mean value for the willingness to like, share, and comment.[1] The willingness to "like" the post was the highest ($M=2.07$, $SE=1.655$), followed by the willingness to "comment" on the post ($M=1.76$, $SE=1.229$) and the willingness to "share" the post ($M=1.71$, $SE=1.340$).

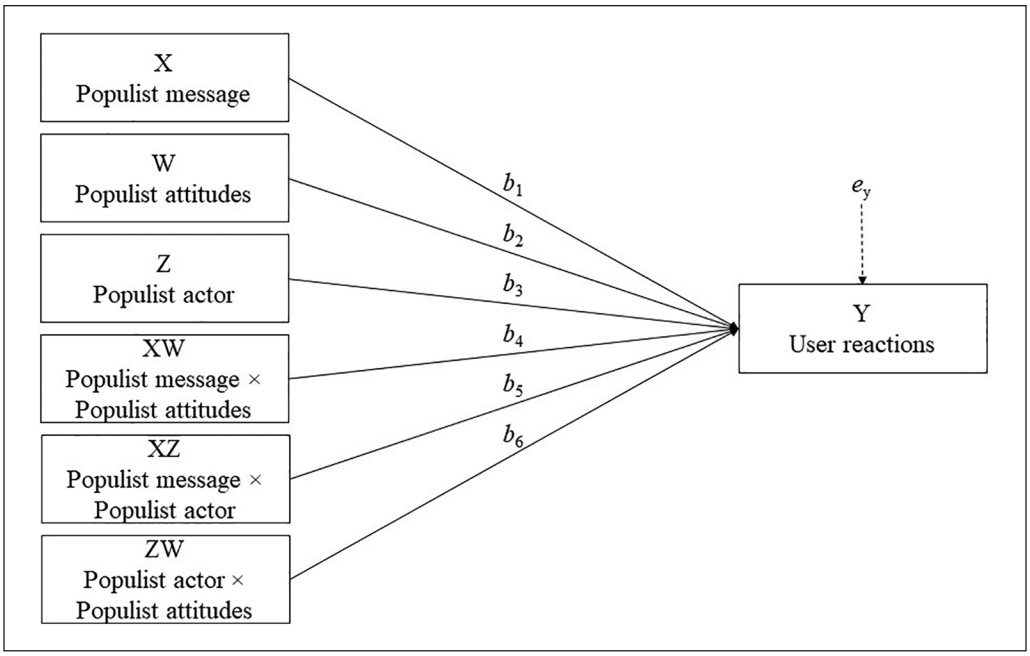

Figure 3. Statistical model of the moderation (based on Hayes, 2018).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the dependent variable and moderator of the four experimental groups.

	Populist actor				Nonpopulist actor			
	Populist message (n = 159)		Nonpopulist message (n = 167)		Populist message (n = 161)		Nonpopulist message (n = 160)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
User reactions	1.80	1.26	1.79	1.13	2.04	1.32	1.76	1.01
Populist attitudes	3.37	0.66	3.37	0.67	3.34	0.68	3.38	0.73

To address the remaining hypotheses, a moderation model was computed using PROCESS (Hayes, 2018), model 2.[2] As depicted in Figure 3, this model assesses the direct effects of the message (populist vs. nonpopulist), the source (populist vs. nonpopulist), and populist attitudes on participants' willingness to interact with the post. Furthermore, the model estimates the interaction effects of the message and source and of both of these factors with populist attitudes. In addition, age, sex, political orientation, and support of the promoted claim were included as covariates. The variables were mean-centered for products, and HC3 correction was used to obtain heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors (Hayes & Cai, 2007). Overall, the model explained a significant amount of the variance in the likelihood of interacting with the post, $F(10, 647) = 17.38$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .26$. Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics for the dependent variable and the moderator.

First, the analysis estimates the effect of the populist message compared to the nonpopulist message. There is a tendency for the populist message to elicit a higher willingness for user reactions ($b = .139$, $SE = 0.083$, $p < .1$), but the effect is narrowly above the standard p-value threshold. Thus, H2a can only be supported in terms of a tendency. However, there was a significant interaction effect between the treatment of the populist message and populist attitudes on the likelihood of reacting to the post ($b = .274$, $SE = 0.132$, $p < .05$). This supports H2b. While there was no difference for individuals with low populist attitudes, individuals with high populist attitudes were more likely to react to the populist Facebook post than to the nonpopulist Facebook post (see Figure 4). In addition, higher populist attitudes by themselves also contributed significantly to the willingness to react to the post ($b = .319$, $SE = 0.072$, $p < .001$).

Second, the model compares the effect of the populist actor to the nonpopulist actor as the source of the message. The populist actor as a source does not have a significant main effect ($b = –.135$, $SE = 0.083$, *ns*) on the likelihood of user reactions, and there is no significant interaction between the actor and populist attitudes ($b = –.195$, $SE = 0.165$, *ns*). There is also no significant interaction between the populist actor and the populist versus nonpopulist message ($b = .035$,

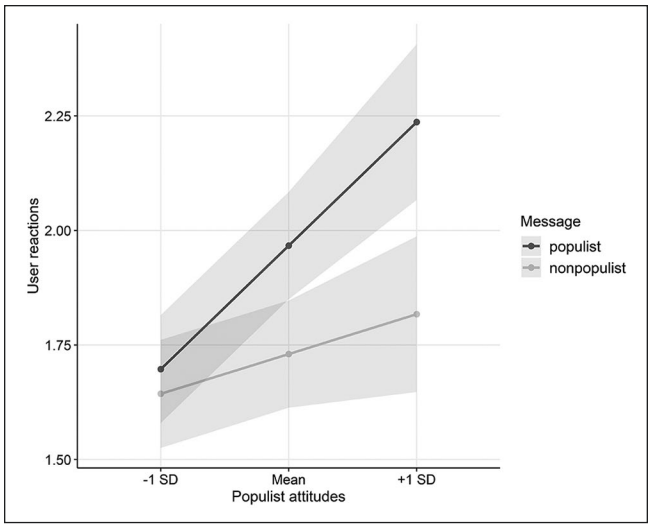

Figure 4. Interaction effect of the populist message and populist attitudes on user reactions.

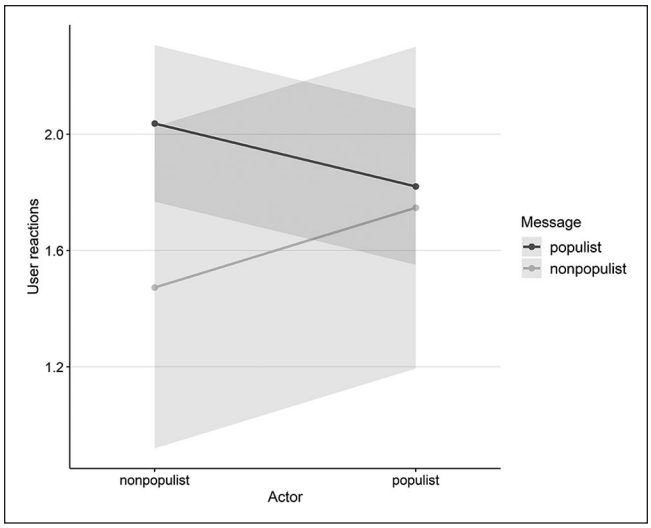

Figure 5. Interaction effect of the populist vs. nonpopulist message and the populist vs. nonpopulist actor on user reactions.

$SE = 0.044$, *ns*). However, as argued above, the recognition of the political actor is crucial for triggering a cognitive schema.

Therefore, we restricted the sample to those participants who correctly identified the party affiliation of the two politicians ($n = 327$) and tested the same moderation model. Again, the model was significant overall, $F(10, 327) = 9.12$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .29$. With the restricted sample, the main effects of the populist actor and the interaction with populist attitudes remain nonsignificant. However, we find a tendency toward a negative interaction between the populist message and the populist actor ($b = –.491$, $SE = 0.269$, $p = .069$). Thus, the difference between populist and nonpopulist messages seems to be larger for the nonpopulist actor than for the typically populist actor (see Figure 5). Therefore, H3a and H3b must be rejected, and this rather unexpected result with regard to RQ1 will be addressed in the "Discussion" section.

With regard to the control variables, political orientation ($b = .178$, $SE = 0.064$, $p < .01$) and support for the claim ($b = .164$, $SE = 0.062$, $p < .01$) have a positive effect on the likelihood of reacting to the posts. This means that participants were more willing to react to the Facebook post when they were more right wing and more supportive of a stronger control of immigration.

In the final step, to answer RQ2, we tested the moderation model for the intentions to like, share, or comment on the posts separately and found interesting differences for the different types of user reactions. For the intention to *like* the Facebook post as the dependent variable, there are no significant effects of the populist message, populist actor, populist attitudes, and no significant interactions. The likelihood to *like* the Facebook post was, however, higher for individuals who had a more right-wing political orientation ($b = .267$, $SE = 0.077$, $p < .001$) and who supported the claim of the posts ($b = .362$, $SE = 0.078$, $p < .001$). For the intention to *share* the Facebook post, we find a significant effect of populist attitudes ($b = .402$, $SE = 0.177$, $p < .05$), a tendency for populist messages ($b = .242$, $SE = 0.132$, $p = .067$), and a significant interaction between populist messages and populist attitudes ($b = .418$, $SE = 0.209$, $p < .05$). However, there were no significant main effects or interactions with regard to the populist actor. Finally, for the intention to *comment* on the post as the dependent variable, we again find a rather unexpected significant negative interaction between the populist message and the source of the message ($b = –.673$, $SE = 0.298$, $p < .05$). Participants were more willing to comment on the populist post if it was by the typically nonpopulist politician.

These differences in the results may be partly explained by the different motives behind the willingness to like, share, or comment on a Facebook post. For those who indicated that they would probably *like* the post (willingness > 3), the three most important motives were to signal that they agree with the source of the post ($M = 4.28$, $SE = 0.919$), share the views of the politician ($M = 4.23$, $SE = 0.867$), or like the content of the post ($M = 4.20$, $SE = 0.958$). For those who indicated that they would probably *share* the post (willingness > 3), the most important motives were to show that they share the views of the politician ($M = 4.13$, $SE = 1.141$), that they agree with the source of the post ($M = 4.07$, $SE = 1.174$), and that they would want their friends to also read this post ($M = 4.02$, $SE = 1.122$). The most common motives to *comment* on the post (willingness > 3) were on one hand, similar to liking and sharing, to show that they share the views of the politician ($M = 3.25$, $SE = 1.547$) and to express agreement with the content of the post ($M = 3.24$, $SE = 1.516$). On the other hand, another common motive for commenting was to criticize the content of the post ($M = 3.28$, $SE = 1.466$). In contrast, participants who reported that they would probably *not* like, share, or comment on the post mostly reported that they generally do not like, share, or comment on any political content

($M = 3.78$, $SE = 1.377$), do not share the politician's views ($M = 3.39$, $SE = 1.486$), or do not agree with the source of the content ($M = 3.33$, $SE = 1.499$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was, first, to examine whether a typically populist actor elicits a populism schema similar to populist messages and how these two factors—content and source—interact. Adding to previous research on populist communication, we tested whether the perception of populist messages differs for typically populist and nonpopulist politicians. As expected, Facebook posts that did not include populist messages were nevertheless perceived as populist if the source was recognized as a typically populist politician. Thus, our study confirms that communication by populist actors can elicit a populism schema, even if the particular message does not contain populist elements (H1). The second objective of this study was to test the widespread assumption that populist messages and populist actors are more likely to trigger user reactions on SNS. As expected, the effect of populist messages on user reactions was moderated by populist attitudes. Recipients were more likely to react to a populist message than a nonpopulist message but only if they had high populist attitudes. Hence, H2b was supported and H2a only in terms of a tendency.

In contrast, the expectation that user reactions would also be fostered by a typically populist politician (H3a), especially for participants with high populist attitudes (H3b), was not supported. Although the presence of a populist actor as the source of the message increased the perception of the message as representing populist communication, this did not affect participants' likelihood to interact with the post. Our results thus suggest that user reactions are driven more by the message than by the actor sending the message. Furthermore, there was a negative interaction between the populist actor and populist messages for those participants who recognized the actors (RQ1). On one hand, these findings might be influenced by the specific actors chosen for this study. On the other hand, the findings may at least in part be explained by looking at the three main types of popularity cues on Facebook separately (RQ2).

For *likes*, we did not find an effect of populist communication or the populist actor. Rather, participants were more willing to like the post if they agreed with the message's main claim. This could be explained by the fact that *liking* a post requires a lower degree of activation and may be a rather habitual or an automatic response (Alhabash et al., 2019). For *shares*, we found the expected interaction effect of populist messages and populist attitudes. Participants were more likely to share populist Facebook posts, especially if they had high populist attitudes. Finally, for *comments*, we found a negative interaction between populist communication and the actor; recipients were more likely to comment on populist messages if they came from the nonpopulist actor. We can only speculate about the reasons behind this. Comments were driven by both approval and rejection of the message. It may be that the "surprising" use of populist communication by nonpopulist actors leads to more comments, be they affirmative or negative. The unexpected use of populist messages by a moderate politician could on one hand give recipients with high populist attitudes the impression that their views have arrived in mainstream politics. On the other hand, it could also elicit a certain "backlash" effect (see also Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017) by recipients who do not support populist ideas. Future research should investigate the motives for commenting on populist posts in more detail.

Of course, this study does not come without limitations. First, we chose specific political actors and a specific issue for the Facebook posts. Immigration as a topic was chosen because it has been identified as one of the central drivers of populism in Western Europe (Salgado et al., 2019; Stanyer et al., 2019; Taggart, 2017). It remains a question for future research whether Facebook posts on other issues, especially left-wing issues, elicit the same effects on user reactions. However, this focus allowed for better internal and external validity. Whereas the SVP in Switzerland is widely identified as a typically populist right-wing party, there is no equivalent populist left-wing party that could be expected to elicit a similarly strong populism schema. Although we chose prominent politicians who are both often featured in the media, only approximately half of the participants could correctly identify their party affiliation. Specifically, the nonpopulist actor was less known, despite being the leader of the fourth-largest party in Switzerland. This may be explained by the federalist political system of Switzerland. Nevertheless, we would expect stronger effects for more well-known political actors, and future research could include multiple actors to generate more robust findings.

Second, participants in this study were presented with an isolated Facebook post in an experimental context, and we measured their self-reported willingness to interact with this post. Actual behavior in a real-world setting might differ from this hypothetical situation. On one hand, reactions may be overestimated in the experiment, as individuals know about the anonymity of the situation, which is not given in the real-world context. On the other hand, reactions may also be underestimated in an artificial setting due to social desirability and due to the fact that generally only a small, highly active, and motivated proportion of the public shares or comments on political content online (Newman et al., 2016). In comparison to content analyses on user reactions, this is a disadvantage, but only an experimental setting allows the controlling of participants' populist attitudes. Furthermore, it also allows for including participants in the study who would *not* interact with a Facebook post, who cannot be accounted for in content analyses. Therefore, content analyses and experiments on this topic should be seen as ideal complements to each other.

Third, we only measured effects of populist messages on a very specific and limited form of intended behavior, namely

on the use of reactions on Facebook. The activation of a populism schema and the perception of the people as a deprived in-group and the elites as an out-group threat may have additional consequences on other online and offline behavior that we cannot assess within our study. Future research should investigate whether populist messages has effects on other types of intended or manifest political engagement, and whether these effects are similarly moderated by citizens' populist attitudes.

Fourth, the perceptions of populism in the posts cluster around the middle response on the scale. This may indicate that the populist stimuli were perceived as only "mildly" populist, while the nonpopulist stimuli were also perceived as somewhat populist. This may have several reasons: First, one group within the nonpopulist treatment had a populist actor as the source of the message, which, as we show, enhances the perception of the posts being populist. Second, also the issue of the newspaper article or the political claim that was made may be perceived as populist. Furthermore, the scale we employed to measure the perception of populist communication in a post was not designed to measure an absolute level of perceptions of populism, but to compare these perceptions between the experimental groups. As the populist posts were perceived to be populist, and the difference between the experimental groups is significant and has a medium effect size, we can conclude that the experimental manipulation was successful. Nevertheless, future research could aim to find stimuli that are perceived more/less populist for the respective conditions.

To summarize, this study demonstrates that the effect of populist communication on user reactions on SNS seems to be moderated by recipients' populist attitudes but that the effect also depends on the sender as well as the type of user reaction. It relies on a nonstudent sample, and the participants are representative of the Swiss population with regard to gender, age, and education. Overall, this study contributes to research on populist communication in two ways. First, it shows that not only populist messages but also typically populist actors may activate a populism schema. While content analyses have found that populist communication is a rather limited and fragmented phenomenon in the media (Hameleers et al., 2017a; Müller et al., 2017) and on SNS (Ernst et al., 2017), this finding indicates that the perceived amount of populist communication may be much higher. Second, the study complements existing content analyses by demonstrating that the effect of populist communication on user reactions is moderated by recipients' populist attitudes. Thus, although populist communication may contribute to a higher reach or popularity on SNS, this is dependent on the characteristics of the politicians' followers.

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Notes

1. As an example, a participant who reacted with a like to the post may have indicated that they would be very much willing to like the post (5) but not at all willing to share (1) or comment (1), which would then result in a mean value of 2.3.
2. In contrast to Hayes's (2018) basic statistical model 2, an additional interaction term between the two moderators, populist actor and populist attitudes, was added.

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